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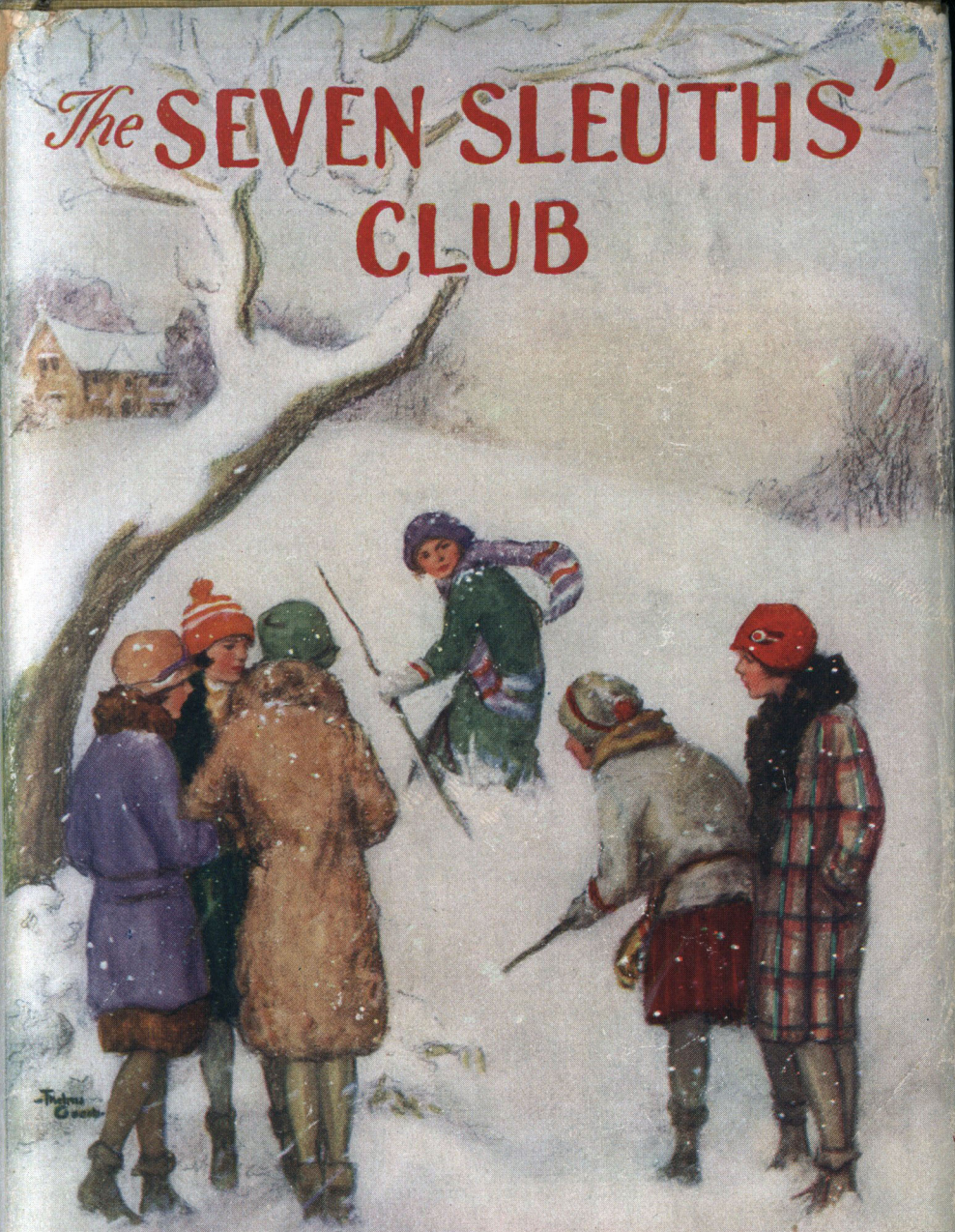

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THE SEVEN SLEUTHS' CLUB

CAROL NORTON

"I wish we had brought some snowshoes," Merry remarked.

(Page 16)

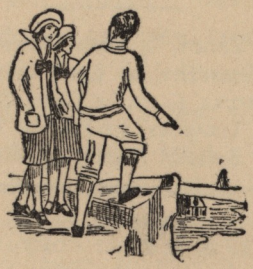
(The Seven Sleuths' Club)

The Seven Sleuths' Club

By CAROL NORTON

AUTHOR OF

"The Phantom Yacht," "Bobs, A Girl Detective," etc.



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THE SEVEN SLEUTHS' CLUB

CHAPTER I.

ENTER THE S. S. C.

A MUSICAL gong, resounding through the corridors of the Sunnyside seminary, was the signal for the opening of doors and the trooping out of girls of all ages, in twos and threes and groups; some with ribboned braids, a few with long curls but most of them with saucy bobs. It was a ten-minute recreation between changing classes. Had it been summer, one and all would have flocked out on the wide green lawns to play a game of toss ball for a few merry moments, or to rest on benches under the great old elms, or to saunter up and down the flower-bordered paths, but, since it was a wild, blustery day in January, the pupils of Miss Demorest's school for select young ladies contented themselves, some of them with opening the heavy front

door and uttering little screams of pretended fear or of sincere delight when a snow-laden gust brushed past them, leaving those nearest with wind-tossed hair.

Six of them, having no curiosity, it would seem, concerning the weather, gathered about the wide fireplace in the library for a few moments of hurried gossip.

"Where's Merry?" Peggy Pierce asked as she glanced toward the open door that led into the music-room. "She said we were to come in here and wait for her. She's made a wild and wonderful discovery, she told me in class. If Miss Preens didn't have eyes in the back of her head, Merry would have told me what it was, but, just as she was starting, around whirled that living skeleton and pointed an accusing bony finger at us as she moaned in that deep, uncanny voice of hers: 'Miss Marion Lee, one demerit for whispering. Miss Peggy Pierce, one demerit for listening.' Say, *can* you beat that?"

"I don't think she's human," Rosamond Wright declared, her iris-blue eyes, round and serious. "Honest, true, I think she has demoniacal powers."

"That's too much for me!" laughed little Betty

Byrd. "Where do you learn such long words, Rose? I'm still using monosyllables."

"Sounds like it!" Bertha Angel commented.

"To return to the subject under discussion, where do you suppose the president of the 'S. S. C.' is?" Peggy Pierce glanced at her wrist watch, but, as usual, it had stopped running.

"Time, Peg? According to my old reliable there's just five minutes more of recess and——" Doris Dreel broke off to exclaim gleefully:

"Here she comes! Here's Merry!" Then to the girl who, laughing and towsled, appeared in the doorway leading from the corridor, Rosamond cried: "What's the big idea, Merry? Didn't you call a fireplace meeting for the very minute after the gong rang, and now it's time for the next gong and we haven't heard what you have to tell us."

But Merry, although she tried to look repentant, was laughing so hard that still another moment was wasted while she made an effort to compose herself. Down on a comfortably upholstered chair she sank, thrusting her feet out toward the blaze. She had laughed herself limp.

"What, pray tell, *is* the joke? I suppose you are aware of the fact that this is January the tenth and

not April the first?" Peggy could be quite sarcastic at times.

"O, I say, Peg, have a heart! I did mean to be here, but just as I was leaving class the Living Skeleton laid a bony hand on my shoulder and told me to remain in my seat through the recess and think of my sins, and of course I had to, but all I could think of was the peach of a news-item which I have to impart, and so, the very minute she left the room, I broke through that mob out in the corridor and here I am." Then, twinkling-eyed, she looked up at the others who were standing about her. "In a thousand years, not one of you could guess what I've found out."

"Heavens, Merry! Don't start that old gag of yours, trying to keep us in suspense. Out with it or the gong will——" Peg's conclusion was not heard, for the gong, evidently hearing its cue, pealed out six malevolent strokes.

"Tragic fate!" The culprit was too mischievous-looking to seem sincerely repentant. "Terribly sorry, girls, but I'd hate to spoil the thrill you'll all get when you hear my news by rattling it off in such a short time."

"Well then, after school. What say?" Betty

Byrd asked, but the gold-brown bobbed curls were being shaken. "Can't be done, my love. I've got to practice with Professor Long-locks. Hadn't opened my music book since last week, and say, but didn't he lay down the law! If I won't practice by myself," says he, "then I shall practice in his presence." She drew a long face. "Heaven pity me!" Then hurriedly, as they joined the throng in the corridors, she whispered to Rose, who was next to her: "Tomorrow will be Saturday. If I live till then, round up the crowd and come over to my house after lunch and be prepared to hear *some* news."

"Merry Lee, *are* you whispering again?"

"Yes'm, Miss Liv—er— I mean, Miss Preens, but it was awful important. Please excuse me this time and I will try not to again offend."

Such penitence was in the brown eyes that glanced beseechingly up at the spindlingly tall monitress that for the moment Miss Preens was almost inclined to accept the apology. Herding forty girls to the study hall and being sure that none of them whispered *was* rather of a task, and, right at that very moment she was sure that she saw two heads near the front suspiciously close together, and so she

pushed through the ranks, at least a head and a half taller than any girl in the school.

"What a wife she'd make for an ogre!" Merry turned, laughing eyes, toward the girl following her.

It happened to be one of the seniors, and a blue ribbon one at that, and so the humorous suggestion was not met with appreciation.

Merry's mental comment was, "When *I* get to be a senior, at least I'll be human."

Just as they were entering the study hall for a brief moment Betty Byrd was close. "I just can't wait till tomorrow," the youngest member of the S. S. C. whispered.

Merry put a warning finger on her lips. Betty glanced up and saw the sharp eyes of Miss Preen turning in their direction.

"Poor Miss Preen!" Merry thought as she sank into her seat and drew a French book from her desk preparing to study. "I wouldn't be her, not for a million!"

CHAPTER II.

SNOW MAIDENS

THE picturesque village of Sunnyside had one main road, wide, elm-shaded, which began at a beautiful hill-encircled lake, and which from there climbed gently up through the business part of town to the residential, passed the orphanage, the fine old seminary for girls and the even older academy for boys, and then led through wide-open spaces, fertile farms, other scattered villages and on to Dorchester, a large, thriving city forty miles away. Merry Lee's father was a builder and contractor whose offices were in Dorchester, but whose home was a comfortable old colonial house on the main thoroughfare in the village of Sunnyside.

The large, square library of the Lee home was warm and cheerful on that blustery, blizzardy Saturday afternoon. A log was snapping and crackling on the hearth and a big slate-colored Persian cat on

the rug was purring loudly its content. A long lad, half reclining on a window seat, was reading a detective story and making notes surreptitiously now and then. At a wide front window, Merry Lee stood drumming her fingers on the pane and peering out at the whirling snow. A chiming clock announced that the hour was three. "And I told the crowd to be there by two-thirty at the latest." Although the girl had not really been addressing him, the boy glanced up to remark: "Might as well give up, Sis. Girls wouldn't venture out in a storm like this; they are like cats. They like to stay in where it's warm and comfy. Hey, Muff?" The puss, upon hearing its name, opened one sleepy blue eye, looked at the boy lazily and then dozed again.

Suddenly there was a peal of merry laughter. "Oh, Jack," his sister exclaimed gayly, "do look out of the window. Did you ever before see such a funny procession?"

Jack looked and beheld coming in at the front gate five maidens so covered with snow that it was impossible to tell which was which.

Merry whirled to defy her brother. "Now, sir, you see girls aren't afraid of a little blizzardly

weather. I'm certainly glad they came. I'd burst if I had to keep my secret any longer."

"Secret?" Jack's voice held a rising inflection and he looked up with interest, but Merry was on her way to open the front door that Katie, the maid, need not be summoned by the bell.

A gust of wind and a flurry of flakes first entered, then, what a stamping as there was outside on the storm porch.

"Hail! Hail! The gang's all here!" Merry sang out, but quickly added: "Oh, don't mind about the snow. Come on in. Katie put matting over the carpet." Then as she looked from one ruddy, laughing face to another, the hostess exclaimed: "But you aren't all here. What's the matter with Rose? Why didn't she come?" Then before anyone could reply, Merry guessed: "O, I suppose her lady mother was afraid her precious darling would melt or be blown away! I don't see how Rose ever gets to school in the winter. Her mother coddles her so!"

"Drives, my dear, as you know perfectly well, but it seems that today the snow plough hasn't been along Willowbend Lane, and her mother won't hear to having the horses taken out. Rose tried to call you up, but your 'phone is on the blink, so she called

me." Peg paused for breath, then went on: "She's simply heart-broken; she said she'd give us all the chocolates we could eat and a nice hot drink if we'd beg, borrow or steal a sleigh somewhere and hold our meeting out there at her house."

Merry's face brightened. "Say, that's a keen idea! I was wondering how I could divulge my secret with Jack hanging around in the library, and I couldn't turn him out very well, being as it's about the only warm spot in the house except the kitchen. What's more, I'm crazy to go for a tramp in this snow storm. Wait till I get on my leggins and overshoes."

They had not long to wait, for in less than five minutes Merry reappeared from the cloakroom under the wide, winding stairway, a fur cap hiding her short curls, a fur cloak reaching to her knees and her legs warmly ensconced in leggins of the same soft grey. She opened the door to the library and called to her brother, who was again deeply engrossed in his book: "The 'cats' are about to leave. We've decided to hold today's *most* important meeting of our secret society in the palatial home of the Widow Wright. I am enlightening you as to our destination, Brother dear, so that if

we happen to be lost in a snow drift, you will know where to come to dig us out."

Jack had leaped to his feet when he saw the merry faces of the five girls in the hall, but before he could join them, they had darted out through the storm porch, and the wind slammed the door after them.

The boy laughed to himself, then shrugged his shoulders as though he was thinking that the modern girl was beyond his comprehension. Then he returned to the fireplace, dropped down into the comfortable depths of a big easy chair and continued to read and scribble alternately. He was preparing a paper to be read that night before the secret society to which he belonged: The C. D. C. The boys had long ago guessed the meaning of the letters that named the girls' club "The S. S. C."

"Dead easy!" Bob Angel had told them. "Sunny Side Club, of course." But the girls had never been able to guess the meaning of the boys' "C. D. C.," nor did they know where the secret meetings were held. These meetings were always at night, and, although Sunnyside girls were modern as far as their conversation went; due to their parents' antiquated ideas, perhaps, they were not considered old enough to roam about the dark streets of the town

at night unless accompanied by their brothers or someone older. And, of course, they couldn't find out the secret meeting-place of the boys when the members were along, and so up to that particular date, January 11, 1928, the seven "S. S. C." girls had not even a suspicion of where the boys' club-rooms were located.

They had vowed that they would ferrit it out if it took a lifetime.

CHAPTER III.

A MERRY ADVENTURE

THE snow-plough had been along on the wide street and sidewalks of the main thoroughfares of the town and the girls had no trouble at all in making headway through the residential and business parts of Sunnyside, but when they turned toward the hills, on the west side of the village, they found that the snow-ploughs had not been so accommodating. Willowbend Lane was covered with deep, soft snow and when Bertha Angel, who chanced to be in the lead, tried to stand on it, she sank down to her knees. Wading was out of the question. Willowbend Lane was on the outskirts of town and it was fully a mile back to the main road. They looked ahead of them across the unbroken snow to where, on a low hill, stood the big brownstone, turreted house in which

lived the wealthy Mrs. Irving Earle Wright and her daughter, Rosamond.

"I wish we'd brought along some snowshoes," Merry remarked. "I hate to let a storm stump me. Brother will certainly tease us well if we go back without having reached our destination."

"I don't think snowshoes would have helped us much," Bertha Angel commented. "It's quite a feat to walk on them until one gets on to the trick of it."

"Hark ye!" Merry exclaimed, lifting a finger of her fur-lined glove. "I hear sleigh bells! Somebody is coming, and if that somebody's destination happens to be up Willowbend Lane, we'll beg a ride."

"What if it's somebody we don't know?" little Betty Byrd ventured to inquire, to which Merry "How *could* it be? Wasn't I born here, and don't I know everybody within a million miles?"

"That sounds rather like hyperbole," Bertha exclaimed.

"Like which?" Doris Drexel teased; then added: "Wouldn't Miss Preen be pleased to hear her prize pupil rattle off that fine sounding word in——"

"Ssh! Ssh!" Merry's hand was on Dory's arm.

"Our victim is now in sight. My, what a swell turnout! Some cutter that, isn't it?" The six girls had stepped to one side of the road and were watching with interest the approach of a large sleigh which was being drawn at a rapid pace by two big white horses perfectly matched. The driver, as they could discern as it drew nearer, was a young man who was almost hidden in a big brown fur coat and cap, but his eyes were peering out and he was amazed to see a bevy of girls standing by the unbroken lane, so evidently in distress.

Stopping his horses, he snatched off his fur cap and revealed a frank, boyish face that had not been seen in that neighborhood before.

"Young ladies," he said courteously, "can you direct me to the home of Colonel Wainwright? In the village they told me to follow this road for a mile and then ask someone which turn to take."

"Oh, yes, we can tell you," Merry replied. "This lane is a short-cut to the Colonel's place."

The lad thanked her and was about to drive on; then he hesitated and turned back.

"Young ladies," he said, "I have always told my sister never to ride with strangers, but if your desti-

nation is in this direction I would be glad to convey you to it. I am Alfred Morrison of Dorchester."

"Oh," Merry exclaimed brightly, "my brother, Jack Lee, is acquainted with you, I am sure. He goes to school in the city."

The boy's good-looking face plainly showed his pleasure. "Indeed I know old Jack well," he exclaimed. "We're doing college prep work together. I planned looking him up as soon as I had finished my business call on the Colonel."

Feeling sure that their mothers could not object, since the strange boy was so well acquainted with Merry's brother, they swarmed into the luxurious sleigh, sitting three deep, which but added to their gaiety. The horses were obliged to travel slowly through the drifts, but they soon came to a part of the lane where the wind had blown the snow from the road to be caught at the fences, and then they made better time. In a very few moments the sleigh was turning in between two high stone gate posts, as Merry had directed, and shortly thereafter the six girls were tumbling out under a wide sheltering portico. "We're terribly grateful to you, Mr. Morrison," Merry exclaimed. "Maybe we'll be able

to pick you up some time when you're stranded somewhere."

The boy laughed good-naturedly. "I hope I won't have that long to wait before I can see you all again." He included the group in his smiling glance, then, because the spirited horses were restive, he lifted his fur cap and turned his attention toward the prancing span.

Laughingly the girls climbed up the stone steps and were about to ring the bell when the door was thrown open and their "prettiest member," as Rose was often called, welcomed them effusively.

"Say, but you missed the time of your young life," Peggy Pierce informed her as the girls removed their overshoes and leggins in the storm vestibule. "Such a handsome boy as we had to drive us up the lane."

"O, you don't have to tell me," Rose laughingly replied. "I was standing in the drawing-room window watching you from the time you appeared at the foot of the lane. If you had turned back, I should have been simply heart-broken. Mother thinks that I have a cold, and she wouldn't let Tony drive me to town, and, of course, I can't use my

runabout in weather like this." Then, when cloaks and caps had been removed and they were gathered about the wide fireplace in Rose's very own sitting-room, that maiden passed around a five-pound box of chocolates to keep the first part of her promise; then she demanded: "Merry Lee, you haven't told the others your exciting news yet, have you?"

Bertha Angel answered for their president: "Nary an inkling of it. Truth to tell, we didn't even ask her. I guess we all thought we'd rather wait until the meeting was called."

"Oh, I say, let's cut out formality, for once, can't we?" Peggy Pierce implored. "Why read the minutes of the last meeting when all we did was entertain the little orphans with a big Christmas tree?"

"All?" Gertrude West lifted her eyebrows questioningly. "I believe, if you left it to the orphans, they would tell you that we did a whole lot to add to their Christmas cheer."

"Sure thing we did, I'll acknowledge that, but——"

"Come to order, if you please!" the president tapped on the arm of her chair, which was upholstered in rose-colored brocade as were the other

chairs and the gilt-framed sofa piled high with silken pillows. "We'll omit reading the minutes, because we really musn't stay long. It gets dark so early this month and we'll have to wade back through the lane. And we won't call the roll, because, of course, we know that we're all here, so, since I believe you are properly curious, I will now tell my news-item. I, Marion Margaret Lee, have discovered the meaning of the letters 'C. D. C.,' and, what is more, I now know *what* the boys *do* at their secret meetings."

"Merry, do you really? How ever did you find out? I've asked Bob over and over to tell me, but he has always refused and has actually declared that we girls never would know."

"Well," their president said, "we *do* know, at least in part. I hate eavesdropping just as much as anyone, but when Jack himself shut me in the stuffy little room off the library where we store our old magazines and books, and where I had gone to hunt up an article I needed for a composition, *how* could I help hearing? Two or three of their 'C. D. C.' club had come over for a special session, I guess. I was just about to burst out when I heard Jack

say, 'Yes, we're alone, all right! Sis went to the library, I think, to do some reference work.' Then, before I really could do anything (I was so wedged in among piles of magazines), Jack had announced: 'Say, fellows, but I've got the keenest Conan Doyle book. Best ever. I call it!' "

Merry paused and looked around the group, her eyes sparkling triumph. For a moment there was silence, then, with a wild Indianish whoop, Peggy, her dark face glowing, cried gleefully: "I tumble!" After glancing about at the others, who were looking rather more puzzled than intelligent, Peg demanded: "Don't any of you get what Merry is driving at? Bertha, *you* surely know what the boys mean by their 'C. D. C.' "

"Of course. How beautifully stupid we are!" Bertha acknowledged. "The Conan Doyle Club! O, wouldn't the boys rage and tear their hair if they knew we had guessed even that much."

But, it was quite plain to the group that Merry had still more to divulge.

"Who is Conan Doyle, anyway?" their youngest asked. "What kind of books did he write?"

"My child," Bertha said condescendingly, "hast

never heard of Sherlock Holmes, the great detective?"

"O, of course, I have," Betty Byrd replied. "Then the boys have a detective club. Is that it, Merry?"

The girl addressed finished eating an especially big oozy chocolate before she noddingly replied: "That's it, all right. I gathered from the little I heard that each member of that club *wants* to become a detective when he is of man's estate, and the thing they do at their club is to take turns making up a mystery and the other boys have to try to solve it."

"Say, *what* fun that would be! I wish they would let girls join their club," Doris Drexel remarked, but Merry put in: "You wouldn't wish it, young lady, if you knew, as I do, how little they think of *our* intelligences. One of them, I couldn't tell which, had written to a lawyer uncle in New York, telling about *their* club, and in reply their uncle had told about some young woman detective in his employ and how clever she was. At which Jack sniffed: 'Well, *she* must be an exception all right. I can't imagine *my* sister Merry or any of *her* crowd solving a mystery, not if the clues were spread out right

in front of them.' Bob laughed at that in his good-natured way and replied that there wasn't much danger of *any one* getting a chance to solve a mystery in *this* little lakeside town where nothing ever happened that was in the least unusual. Then he said: "That's why we have to make up our own mysteries, since we can't unearth any real ones to practice on."

All the while that Merry had been talking, Peg had been sitting on the edge of her chair looking as though she would burst if she didn't soon get a chance to say what was on her mind. The moment their president paused, she leaped in with: "Girls, I've thought of the most scrumbunctious idea! Let's have a detective club of our own, and let's find a *real* mystery to solve and show those boys a thing or two. Won't they be humiliated, good and proper, when they learn that *we,* seven mere girls, without intelligence, have solved the greatest mystery that ever occurred in the village of Sunnyside."

"Hold on, Peg! Your imagination is running away with you. Anyone would think you had already found the mystery to solve. I'm of the opinion that Jack is right, or Bob, whoever said it,

that there never is anything mysterious happening in this quiet, sleepy old town, and if there isn't, *how,* pray, can we solve it?" Bertha was always logical and practical. Their "balance wheel," she was sometimes called.

"I bet you I find a mystery." Peg stood up as though she were going to start right out on the search. "I've always been wild about mystery stories; read every one at the library, and I'll know *just* how to go about solving one, when it's found."

"Sit down, friend sleuth, and tell us your plan. There *are* possibilities in it, I'll agree." Merry smiled up into the olive face of their most energetic member, as she continued reminiscently: "In the beginning we named our club The S. S. C. because we lived in Sunnyside; then we gradually added a second meaning to please our saintly Gertrude——"

"You're a tease!" The sweet-faced girl, their minister's daughter, smiled lovingly at the speaker, who continued as though unconscious of the interruption, "which was 'Spread Sunshine Club.' We proceeded to sew for missionary barrels, though heaven help the heathen who had to wear the clothes *I* made if they care anything about a stylish fit."

A burst of merry laughter proved that her listeners were recalling some garment made by their president that had not come up to specifications. "Then we decided to center our spreading sunshine efforts on our home orphanage. Shh! Don't say anything, Trudie! I know we've done nobly, and all that, but *now* I feel about the way Peg does, that if we keep on being *so saintly,* I'll be drawn up heavenward before I've had a real fling, so what I am going to suggest is that we add a third meaning to our club letters, which shall be——"

"Oh, Madame President, may I say what?" Peggy was again on the edge of her chair waving a frantic hand as though she were a child in school.

"Sure thing! Shoot!"

"How would 'Seven Sleuths' Club' do for the new meaning?"

"Actually inspired, I should say. Now, all that is left is to find a mystery to solve. Peggy Pierce, I appoint you and your twin friend, Doris Drexel, a committee of two to find a mystery before our next meeting, which is to be held at Bertha Angel's home one week from today. If, by that time, you have failed, I will appoint——"

"Fail? Dory and I don't know the meaning of the word," that slender maid retorted.

Bertha, who was nearest the window, then exclaimed: "Someone is driving in. Why, if it isn't that nice Alfred Morrison."

"Great!" Merry declared. "Now we can get a ride out of the lane. I do believe that is why he is coming."

And she was right. Rose answered the ring before a maid could appear, and the youth, cap in hand, informed her that he had happened to think that since the young ladies had had no way to get into the lane, perhaps they had no way to get out. Rose replied in her pretty manner that she knew the girls would be glad to go with him. Then she invited him in to have a cup of hot chocolate, which, even then, a maid was passing to the club members, having been told to appear at that particular hour.

Without the least sign of embarrassment the boy joined the girls in the cosy little sitting-room off the big library, and drank a cup of chocolate as though he really enjoyed it. Half an hour later, as the sun was setting, Merry said with apparent solemnity, "We will now adjourn the meeting, which

I believe has been most satisfactory, and let me urge each and every one of our members to remember that all that has passed today is *most secret* and that no matter how the boys of the 'C. D. C.' may *pry,* not an inkling of what has here occurred is to be divulged to them." Then, twinkling-eyed, she changed her tone to one more natural. "Won't they have the surprise of their young lives, though, if we do succeed?"

"No ifs!" Peg interjected with determination. *"We will!"*

CHAPTER IV.

INTERESTING NEWS

THE midwinter blizzard continued, and so intense was the cold and so unceasing the cutting, icy blast that Miss Demorest, at the request of several parents, sent forth a messenger to inform the day pupils that classes would not be resumed until the storm had subsided. But wind, ice and snow had no terrors for the members of the "S. S. C.," and, since important matters were afoot in the reorganization of their club, it was decided, by those whose 'phones had not been put out of use by the tempest, to beg or borrow a sleigh and hold the meeting at the home of Bertha Angel on Monday instead of the following Saturday. Mr. Angel, being a grocer, possessed several delivery sleighs, and since Bertha could drive as well as her brother Bob, Merry, whose 'phone was out of order, was amazed to see such an equipage draw up in front of her door at about

two on that blizzardy afternoon. Her first thought was that Bob was delivering groceries, but why at the front of the house, since he always went in at the side drive? Then, as the snow curtain lifted a little, she discerned the forms of several persons warmly wrapped and actually huddled on the straw-covered box part of the delivery sleigh. The driver was tooting on a horn and looking hopefully toward the house. Then it dawned on Merry that it was Bertha who was driving, and not Bob, as she had supposed. In a twinkling she leaped to the door of the storm vestibule and called that she would be right with them. And she was, clad in her warmest; an Esquimaux girl could not have been more hidden in fur. How her brown eyes sparkled as she climbed up on the front seat by the driver, which place had been reserved for her since she was president.

"Of all the grand and glorious surprises!" she exclaimed, glancing back at the laughing huddle, as Bertha drove out of the gate. "Why, I declare to it, you've even got our rose-bud. How did you manage that? I didn't think her mother would let her out of the house again until next summer."

"It took lots of loving 'suasion', I can assure you," Rose replied. "And I don't even know if

that would have worked had it not been that an old friend whom Mother hadn't seen in years arrived in a station sleigh to spend the afternoon, and in order to be freed from my teasing, the lovely lady said, 'Wrap up well and take a foot-warmer.' "

"Three cheers for the friend!" Merry said; then added, drawing her fur coat closer: "My, how dense the snow is! Give me that horn, Bursie; I'll toot so that other vehicles will know that we are coming."

The comfortable old white house set among tall evergreen trees that was the Angel's home was in the center of town on the long main street and not far from the Angel grocery, the best of its kind in the village. Bertha drove close to the front steps, bade the girls go right in and wait for her in the sitting-room while she took the delivery sleigh back to the store, but hardly had they swarmed out when a merry whistle was heard through the curtain of snow and the form of a heavy-set boy appeared. "Oh, good, here comes Bob!" his sister called. "I'd know that whistle in darkest Africa. It outrobins a robin for cheeriness."

"Hello, S. S. C.'s," a jolly voice called, and then a walking snowman stopped at the foot of the steps and waved a white arm to the girls who were stand-

ing under the shelter of the porch roof. "Going to spread some more sunshine today? Well, it sure is needed."

Bertha, having climbed down, Bob leaped up on the high seat and took the reins, then with a good-natured grin on his ruddy, freckled face, the boy called: "It was shabby of us to guess what your S. S. C. meant, wasn't it? Boys *are* clever that way, but girls aren't supposed to be very clever, you know. If they're good looking and good cooks, that's all we of the superior sex expect of them."

"Indeed, *is that so,* Mr. Bob?" Peggy just could not keep quiet. "I suppose you think *we* never could guess the meaning of your 'C. D. C.' "

"I know you couldn't," Bob replied with such conviction that Merry, fearing it would tantalize Peg into betraying their knowledge, changed the subject with: "S'pose you'll take us all home, Bob, before dark sets in."

"Righto!" was the cheery response as the boy started the big dapple horse roadward.

Fifteen minutes later the girls were seated about the wide fireplace in the large, comfortably furnished living-room. This home lacked the elegance that was to be found in the palatial residence of Rose,

nor did it have the many signs of culture that Merry's father and mother had collected in their travels, but there was a homey atmosphere about it that was very pleasant.

Mrs. Angel, short, plump, cheerful, whom Bob closely resembled, appeared for a moment to greet the girls and then returned to a task in another part of the house.

Bertha, who had disappeared, soon returned with a huge wicker basket. "I thought we might just as well keep on with our 'Spread Sunshine' activities," she explained, "even though we have added a new meaning to our 'S. S. C.' " She was taking out small all-over aprons of blue gingham as she spoke. The name of a girl was pinned to each one.

"Sure thing." Merry reached for her garment. "Our fingers can sew for the orphans while our tongues can unravel mysteries if—" her eyes were twinkling as they turned inquiringly toward Peggy Pierce, "our committee of two has unearthed one as yet."

"Of course we haven't!" was the maiden's indignant response. "How could we find a mystery in a snow-storm like this?"

"True enough!" Merry said in a more conciliatory tone. "I really had not expected you to."

"In truth," Rose, curled in a the big easy chair near the fire, put in teasingly, "for *that* matter, we don't expect a real mystery to be unearthed in this little sound-asleep town of Sunnyside. Goodness, don't we know *everybody* in it, and don't our parents know *their* parents and their grandparents and——"

"Well, somebody new *might* come to town," Doris, the second member of the sleuth committee, remarked hopefully.

"Sure thing, someone *might,*" Merry said with such emphasis on the last word that Bertha dropped her work on her lap to comment: "You speak as though you *knew* that someone new is coming."

"I do!" Merry replied calmly, bending over her sewing that the girls might not see how eager she was to tell them her news.

"Stop being so tantalizing, Merry! What in the world do you know today that you didn't know Saturday?" Peg inquired.

"Oh, I know, I know!" Rose sang out. "It's something that handsome boy, Alfred Morrison, told you when he went to call on Jack. Out with it, Merry; don't keep us in suspense."

"Of course! How stupid we didn't think to ask what happened after you and Alfred Morrison had left us at our homes," Doris put in. "We knew he was going with you to call on Jack. Is *he* coming to live in Sunnyside? Say, wouldn't it be keen if he did?"

"Well, you are all warm anyway," Merry conceded. "The someone who is coming to live in Sunnyside; I mean the someone to whom I am referring, is a girl, but I guess *we won't* want to cultivate *her* acquaintance at all, at all."

"Merry Lee, if you don't tell us, I shall come over there and shake you until you do." Betty Byrd was so tiny that this threat made the girls laugh gaily, but it had the desired effect, for their president ceased teasing and told them a story which interested them greatly.

CHAPTER V.

A MISCHIEVOUS PLAN

"WELL, to begin at the beginning, Jack was pleased as punch to see Alfred Morrison, and for the first fifteen minutes they talked of nothing but college prep, athletics, fraternities and the like. Then Mother called me and I left them alone in the library. When I returned, half an hour later, Alfred was gone, but this is the tale Brother told me. It seems our new friend has a sister about our age, Geraldine by name."

"Oho," Bertha put in, "then *that* is who the newcomer to our town is to be."

Peg laughed. "We'll have to put you on the sleuth committee, Bursie, but do hurry and tell us the worst."

"Perhaps it's the best," Gertrude suggested, but Merry shook her head. "Worst is more like it. But here goes: Mr. Morrison, their father, lived in this

village when he was a boy. He was mischievous and wilful and he had trouble with his father, who was stern and unrelenting. When he was sixteen he ran away to sea and was gone three years on a voyage around the world. When he returned he went West, where he married and made a good deal of money in railroads and mines. During this time he had often written to his Mother begging to be forgiven, but his letters were always returned to him and so he supposed that his parents no longer cared for him. At last, however, when his wife died, leaving him with two small children, he came back to Dorchester only to find that his father and mother were gone and the old home falling into rack and ruin.

"Sad at heart, he settled in the city where Alfred and his sister were brought up by tutors and governesses."

"Oh, the poor things!" Doris Drexel said pityingly. "My heart aches for any boy or girl brought up without knowing the tenderness of a mother's love."

"That brings the story up to the present," Merry continued. "Last week Mr. Morrison left very suddenly for Europe in the interests of his business

and he may be gone all winter. He did not want to leave his son and daughter alone in the city house with the servants, and so he sent Alfred down here to see Colonel Wainright, who was his pal when he was a boy, to ask him if they might remain with him for a few months. The Colonel was delighted, Alfred told Jack, and so they are both coming to our village to spend the winter."

"But, Merry, *why* do you think that is *not* good news? I think it will be jolly fun to have another girl friend. There's always room for one more."

Gertrude said this in her kindly way, but Peg protested: "There certainly isn't room for one more in the Seven Sleuths' Club."

"Indeed not!" Merry seconded. "But don't worry, the haughty Miss Geraldine won't *want* to associate with simpering country milkmaids."

"With what?" Every girl in the room dropped her sewing on her lap and stared her amazement.

Merry laughed as she replied: *"Just that,* no less. I knew how indignant you'd all be. I would, too, if it weren't so powerfully funny. I'd pity the cow I'd try to milk."

"What reason have you for thinking this girl,

Geraldine, will be such a snob?" Gertrude asked as she resumed her sewing.

"Reason enough!" Merry told them. "Alfred said that his sister was very angry when she heard that her father was going to send her to such a 'back-woodsy' place, meaning our village, and she declared that she simply would not go. She, Geraldine Morrison, who was used to having four servants wait upon her, to live in an old country house where she would probably have to demean herself by making her own bed? No, never! She raged and stormed, Alfred said, and declared that she would go to visit some cousins in New York, but to that her father would not listen. He told her that he wanted his little girl, who is none too robust, to spend a winter breathing the country air in the village where he was a boy. Of course, since Geraldine is only sixteen, she had to give in, and so next week she is to arrive, bag and baggage. She told Alfred that he needn't think for one moment that she was going to hobnob with silly, simpering country milkmaids? Alfred said that he hated to tell Jack all this, but he liked us so much he wanted us to be prepared, so that we would not be hurt by his sister's rudeness."

There were twinkles appearing in the eyes of the mischievous Peggy. "Oh, girls," she said gaily, "I've thought up the best joke to play on this haughty young lady who calls us simpering milkmaids. Let's pretend that is *what we really are,* and let's call on her and act the part. We're all crazy about private theatricals. Here's our chance."

"Say, but that's a keen idea!" Merry agreed chucklingly.

Then they chattered merrily as they laid their plans. They would give the new girl a few days to become used to the village, then, en masse, they would go up to Colonel Wainright's and call upon her.

There was so much laughter and such squeels of delight in the next half hour that Mrs. Angel, appearing in the doorway with a platter heaped with doughnuts, was moved to inquire: "What mischief are you girls up to? I never before heard so much giggling." Her beaming expression proved to them that she was not displeased.

"Oh, Mrs. Angel, you surely were well named."

"*Such* doughnuts! Do leave the platter, please; this one has melted in my mouth already!"

"I do hope Bob won't come before we have them

eaten!" were among the remarks that were uttered as the doughnuts vanished. Bertha, her eyes brimming with laughter, had disappeared to return a second later with a tray of glasses and a huge blue crockery pitcher. "This drink is appropriate, if nothing else," she announced gaily as she placed her burden on the long library table and began to pour out the creamy milk.

"It didn't take *you* long to milk a cow," Peg sang out. "Yum, this puts the fresh into the refreshments."

"Oh-oo, Peg, *don't* try to be funny. Can't be done, old dear," Merry teased, then held up a warning finger. "Hark! I hear sleigh bells coming. It's Bob, and Jack is with him. Alak for us and the six left doughnuts."

"Oh, well, they deserve them if anyone does, coming after us in a storm like this," Gertrude remarked as she folded her sewing. "I'm glad they have come, for Mother doesn't feel very well and I wanted to be home in time to get supper."

A second later there was a great stamping on the side porch and the boys, after having brushed each other free of snow, entered, caps in hand.

"Bully for us!" Bob said. "Believe me, I know

when to time my arrival at these 'Spread on the Sunshine' Club meetings. However, wishing to be polite, I'll wait until they're passed." Courteous as his words were, he did not fit his action to them, for, having reached the table, he poured out a tumbler of milk for Jack and tossed him a doughnut, which Jack caught skillfully in his teeth.

The girls, always an appreciative audience, laughed and clapped their hands. "Bertha, it was nice of you to provide a juggler to amuse your guests," Rose remarked.

"Jack must have been a doggie in a former existence," Peg teased.

"Sure thing I was!" the boy replied good-naturedly. "I'd heaps rather have been a dog than a cat."

"Sir!" Peg stepped up threateningly near. "Are there any concealed inferences in that?"

"Nary a one. I think in a former existence *you* girls must have all been sunbeams."

"Ha! ha!" Bob's hearty laughter expressed his enjoyment of the joke. "That's a good one, but do get a move on, young ladies; I've got to deliver groceries after I have delivered you."

The girls flocked from the room, leaving the boys

to finish the doughnuts. In the wide front hall, as they were donning their wraps, they did a good deal of whispering. "Meet at my house tomorrow afternoon," Peggy told them. "Bring any old duds you can find; we'll make up our milkmaid costumes and have a dress rehearsal."

CHAPTER VI.

MILK MAIDS AND BUTTER CHURNERS

THE next day arrived, as next days will, and, as the blizzard had blown itself away and only a soft feathery snow was falling, the girls, communicating by the repaired telephone system, decided to walk to the home of Peggy Pierce, which was centrally located. In fact, it was on a quiet side street "below the tracks," not a fashionable neighborhood, but that mattered not at all to the girls of Sunnyside. The parents of some of the seven were the richest in town, others were just moderately well off, but one and all were able to send their daughters to the seminary, and that constituted the main link that bound them together, for they saw each other every day and walked back and forth together. Peggy's father owned "The Emporium," a typical village dry-goods store.

Peg threw the door open as soon as the girls

appeared at the wooden gate in the fence that surrounded the rather small yard of her home.

"Hurray for the 'S. S. C.'!" she sang out, and Merry replied with the inevitable, "Hail! Hail! The gang's all here!"

When they were in the vestibule and Peg, with a small broom, had swept from each the soft snow, they flocked into the double parlors which were being warmed by a cosy, air-tight stove. On the walls were old-fashioned family portraits, and the haircloth furniture proclaimed to the most casual observer that it had seen its best days, but, as in the home of Bertha, there was an atmosphere of comfort and cheer which made one feel pleased to be there. A dear little old lady sat between the window and the stove. She pushed her "specs" up on the ruffle of her lavender-ribboned cap, and beamed at the girls as they entered. Then, laying down her knitting, she held out a softly wrinkled hand to Gertrude, who was the first at her side.

"I hope you girls won't mind my being here," she said, looking from one to another. "I could go somewhere else, if you would."

"Well, Grandmother Dorcas, I'll say you'll not go anywhere else," Peggy declared at once. "For one

thing, there *isn't* another real warm room in this house except the kitchen, and secondly, we all want you to help us plan this prank."

The old lady, who had partly risen, sank back as she looked lovingly at her grandchild. To the others she said: "It's mighty nice of Peggy to want me to share her good times. Some young folks don't do that. They think grandparents are too old to enjoy things, I guess, but I feel just as young inside as I did when I was your age, and that was a good many years ago. Now go right ahead, just like I wasn't here." The dear old lady took up her knitting, replaced her glasses, and began to make the needles fly dexterously.

"Did you all find suitable costumes?" the hostess asked. "I didn't," Betty Byrd declared. "You know when Mother and I came up from the South to keep house for Uncle George, we only brought our newest clothes, and nothing that was suitable for a milkmaid costume.

"Well, don't you worry, little one," Peggy laughingly declared, for Betty's pretty face was looking quite dismal. "My Grandmother Dorcas has saved everything she wore since she was a little girl, I do believe, and now she is eighty years old.

There are several trunks full of things in the attic. I told Grandma about our plan, and she was so amused, more than Geraldine will be, I'm sure of that. I thought we'd go up there to dress. It's real warm, for Mother has been baking all the morning and the kitchen chimney goes right through the storeroom and it's cosy as can be." Then to the little old lady, who was somewhat deaf, the girl said in a louder voice: "Grandma, dear, when we're dressed, we'll come down here and show you how we look."

The sweet, wrinkled old face beamed with pleasure. "Good! Good!" she said. "I'll want to see you."

All of the girls except Betty had bundles or satchels and merrily they followed their young hostess upstairs to the attic.

They found the small trunk-room cosy and warm, as Peggy had promised. On the wall hung a long, racked mirror, and few chairs that were out of repair stood about the walls. Several trunks there were including one that looked very old indeed.

For a jolly half hour the girls tried on the funny old things they found in the trunks, utilizing some of the garments they had brought from their homes,

and at the end of that time they were costumed to their complete satisfaction.

In front of the long, cracked mirror Rose stood laughing merrily. "Oh, girls," she exclaimed, "don't I look comical?"

She surely did, for, on top of her yellow curls, she had a red felt hat with the very high crown which had been in vogue many years before.

This Peggy had trimmed with a pink ribbon and a green feather. An old-fashioned calico dress with a bright red sash and fingerless gloves finished the costume. The other girls were gowned just as outlandishly, and they laughed until the rafters rang.

"Peggy, you are funniest of all," Merry declared.

"That's because she has six braids sticking out in all directions," Betty Byrd said, "with a different colored piece of calico tied to each one."

"Honestly, girls, I have laughed until my sides ache," Doris Drexel said, "but what I would like to know is how are we ever going to keep straight faces when we get there? If one of us laughs that will give the whole thing away."

"We had practice enough in that comedy we gave last spring at school," Bertha Angel said. "Don't

you remember we had to look as solemn as owls all through that comical piece? Well, what we did once, we can do again."

"I did giggle just a little," their youngest confessed.

"Betty Byrd, don't you dare giggle!" Peggy shook a warning finger at the little maid. Then she added: "It's such a lot of work to get all decked up like this, I wish we could make that call today."

Merry's face brightened. "We can! I actually forgot to tell you that Alfred Morrison was over last night to see Brother and told him they had arrived a day sooner than they had expected."

"Hurray for us!" Doris sang out. "It does seem like wasted effort to get all togged up this way just for a rehearsal."

"Let's go downstairs and speak our parts before Grandma Dorcas, then we'll find someone to drive us out. I'll phone the store and see if I can borrow Johnnie Cowles. He's delivering for The Emporium now, and I guess this snowy day he can spare the time."

This being agreed upon, they descended to the living-room. The girls pretended that Grandma

Dorcas was the proud Geraldine and that they were calling upon her. The old lady enjoyed her part and did it well; then Johnnie appeared with the sleigh and the girls gleefully departed.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNWILLING HOSTESS

MEANWHILE in the handsome home of Colonel Wainright, on the hill-road overlooking the distant lake, a very discontented girl sat staring moodily into the fireplace of a luxuriously furnished living-room. Her brother stood near, leaning against the mantlepiece.

"I won't stay here!" Geraldine declared, her dark eyes flashing rebelliously. "I won't! I won't! Father has no right to send me to this back-woods country village. What if he *was* born here? *That* surely was *his* misfortune, and no sensible reason why *I* should be condemned to be buried here for a whole winter."

"But, Sister mine," the boy said in a conciliatory tone. "I've been trying to tell you that there are some nice girls living in Sunnyside, but you won't let me. If you would join their school life, you

would soon be having a jolly time. That's what *I* mean to do."

"Alfred Morrison, I don't see how you came by such plebian ideas. I should think that you would be ashamed to have your sister attending a district school when you know that I have always been a pupil at a most fashionable seminary and have associated only with the *best* people."

"What makes them the best, Sister?"

The girl tapped one daintily slippered foot impatiently as she said scathingly: "Alfred, you are *so* provoking sometimes. You know the Ellingsworths and the Drexels and all those people are considered the best in Dorchester."

Alfred was about to reply that there was a family of Drexels living in Sunnyside, but, luckily, before he *had* said it, his attention was attracted by the ringing of a cow-bell which seemed to be out in the driveway. Geraldine also heard, but did not look up. Some delivery wagon, she thought, but Alfred, who stood so that he could look out of the window, understood what was happening when he saw the village girls descending from a delivery sleigh. They slipped out of their fur coats, leaving them in Johnnie's care, and appeared in shawls and

old-fashioned capes. For a puzzled moment Alfred gazed; then, as something of the meaning of the joke flashed over him, he almost laughed aloud. Luckily Geraldine continued to stare moodily into the fire, nor did she look up when Alfred left the room. Before the girls on the porch had time to ring the bell, the boy opened the door and, stepping out, he asked quietly but with twinkling eyes: "Why the masquerade?"

"Don't you dare to spoil the joke?" Merry warned when she had told him that since his sister had expected them to be milkmaids, they had not wanted to disappoint her. Then she informed him: "My name is Miss Turnip. You introduce me and I'll introduce the others." Alfred's eyes were laughing, but in a low voice he said, "I'm game!"

Then aloud he exclaimed: "How do you do, Miss Turnip. I am so glad that you came to call. Bring your friends right in. My sister will be pleased to meet you."

Merry, in telling Jack about it afterwards, said that Alfred played his part as though he had been practicing it for weeks.

"Sister Geraldine," he called pleasantly to the girl who had risen and was standing haughtily by the

fireplace, "permit me to present the young ladies who live in Sunnyside. They have very kindly called to welcome you to their village."

The newcomers all made bobbing curtsies, and, to her credit be it said, that even little Betty did not giggle, but oh, how hard it was not to.

Of course there had been classes in good breeding in the Dorchester seminary. One of the rules often emphasized was that it did not matter *how* a hostess might feel toward a guest, she must not be rude in her own home. So Geraldine bowed coldly and asked the young ladies to be seated.

Alfred, daring to remain no longer, bolted to his room and laughed so hard that he said afterwards that he couldn't get his face straight for a week.

Peggy Pierce, being the best actress among "The Sunny Seven," had been asked to take the lead, and so, when they were all seated as awkwardly as possible, she began: "My name is Mirandy Perkins. We all heard as haow yew had come to taown, and so we all thought as haow we'd drop in and ask if yew'd like to jine our Litery Saciety. We do have the best times. Next week we're a goin' to have a Pumpkin Social. Each gal is to bring a pumpkin pie and each fellow is to bring as many pennies as

he is old to help buy a new town pump for the Square. That's why it's called Pump-kin Social."

This remark was unexpected, not having been planned at the dress rehearsal, and it struck Rosamond as being so funny that she sputtered suspiciously, then taking out a big red cotton handkerchief, she changed the laugh into a sneeze.

Geraldine sat siffly gazing at her callers with an expression that would have frozen them to silence had they been as truly rural as they were pretending, but, if she had only known it, these country girls had been attending a school every bit as fashionable as the seminary of which she so often boasted.

"I thank you," that young lady replied, "but it is not my intention to remain in this backwoodsy place. I plan leaving here next week at the latest."

"Wall, naow, ain't that too bad? We thought as how yew'd be seech an addition to our saciety," Peggy continued her part. "Of course we all feel real citified ourselves. We get the latest styles right from Dorchester for our toggins."

"Toggins?" Geraldine repeated icily. "Just what are they?"

There surely was a titter somewhere; but Peggy, pretending to be surprised, remarked: "Why, tog-

gins are hats and things like Jerushy's here." She nodded at the caricature of a red hat with green and pink trimmings which was perched on Rosamond's head.

Merry returned to the rehearsal lines from which they had sidetracked.

"Yew'd enjoy our Litery Saciety, I'm sure," she said, "bein' as yew have a litery sort of a look. We meet onct a week around at differunt houses. We sew on things for the missionary barrel, and then one of us reads aloud out of The Farmers' Weekly."

Just then the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour of four, and Peggy sprang up. "Crickets!" she exclaimed, "Here 'tis comin' on dark most, and me not home to milk the caows."

"An' I've got to churn yet before supper," Doris Drexel ventured her first remark. Luckily Geraldine did not glance at the soft, white hands of the speaker. They were all smiling in the friendliest fashion, but as soon as they were outside and riding away in their queer equipage, they shouted and laughed as they had never laughed before.

"Her highness will probably leave town tomor-

row," Doris remarked, "but if she does, the town will be well rid of her."

"I wonder if we put it on too thick," Bertha questioned as they were slipping on their fur coats, which they had left in the sleigh. "I was afraid she would see through our joke."

"I don't believe she did," Merry said. "Alfred told Jack that his sister got her ideas of girls who live in country villages from the moving pictures, and they are always as outlandishly dressed as we are."

"Well it will be interesting to see what comes of our nonsense," Gertrude remarked. "On the whole I feel rather sorry for that poor, unhappy girl."

When Alfred saw the queer equipage disappearing, he descended to the library. "Oh, hello, Sis," he said, "Have your callers gone?"

Geraldine's eyes flashed and she stamped her small foot as she said:

"Alfred Morrison, I just know that you asked those dreadful creatures to call on me. I suppose you would like to have *me* attend their Pumpkin Social, which is to be given to raise money to buy a town pump."

This was too much for Alfred and he laughed heartily.

"Well," he said at last, when he could speak, "I take off my hat to the young ladies of Sunnyside. They are the cleverest damsels that I ever met." So saying, he disappeared, fearing that he would break his promise to Merry and reveal that it was all a joke if he remained any longer with his indignant sister.

Geraldine would probably have packed her trunk that very night and departed the next day if she had had sufficient money with which to buy a ticket, but for some reason her monthly allowance from her father had been delayed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE LETTERS

THE following morning Colonel Wainright called the girl into his study, and, laying his hand on her shoulder, he said: "Little lassie, why don't you try to please your daddy and go to school in the village here at least until the spring vacation. Then, as you know, you will be able to return to Mrs. Potter's seminary, if you wish."

"If I wish, Colonel Wainright?" the maiden exclaimed. "Why, of course I wish to go back there this very minute, where I can associate with girls who are my equals. I am sorry to seem ungrateful to you, Colonel, but I simply must leave this horrid village. I wish you could have seen the outlandish girls who called on me yesterday. What would Adelaine Drexel or Muriel Ellingworth think if they knew I was associating with milkmaids and—and butter churners!"

Alfred had told the older man about the joke which had been played on poor Geraldine and he had been much amused. Before he could reply, however, the door bell rang. "The postman, I expect!" the Colonel said as he went into the hall.

"Good!" Geraldine exclaimed. "I do hope he has a letter for me from Papa. It is long past time for my allowance, and I simply must have it."

There were two letters for the girl, but neither bore the desired postmark. "Oh, dear, it is so provoking!" she declared, and then she climbed the stairs to her room. Colonel Wainright did not tell her that one of his envelopes bore her father's handwriting. Again in his study, he opened and read the letter.

"DEAR OLD PAL:—Your report of my little girl is discouraging, but we must remember that she was brought up without a mother and has undoubtedly received false ideas of life from her associates, a few of whom I do not approve. Geraldine had, while in Dorchester, two intimate friends who were very unlike. Adelaine Drexel is a very nice, wholesome girl, whose ancestors have been gentry for

generations, but my chief reason for sending my daughter to Sunnyside was to separate her from her chosen companion, Muriel Ellingworth. Alfred has been much concerned about this friendship. He has often told me that Muriel, who is pretty in doll fashion, makes secret engagements with boys of whom her mother would not approve, and she invites my little girl to join them. Now I want Geraldine to have boy friends in a frank, open way, but of this sub-rosa business, my son and I heartily disapprove, and since my daughter hasn't a mother to guide her, I decided that nothing would do her as much good as a winter spent in the wholesome atmosphere of Sunnyside, where the rich and poor play together in a happy, healthy way.

"Geraldine will feel terribly about it at first, but I am hoping that she is intrinsically too much like her splendid mother to remain a snob when she is convinced that among that class she will not find the worth-while people.

"It was mighty good of you, old pal, to help me out in this matter, but if you find the task a troublesome one, pack her up and send her to a good boarding school until I return. I am enclosing a check.

Do not give my little girl much at a time, just sufficient for her needs. Some day I will do something for you.

"Yours,

"AL."

The Colonel re-read the letter and then, leaning over the fireplace, he carefully burned it. The check he placed in his long pocketbook.

"Poor girl," he mused, as he watched the last bit of white paper charring among the coals. "How disappointed she will be just at first. She has many hard lessons to learn, but her father was wise to send her here, where the girls are all so wholesome and still children at heart."

Then his pleasant face wrinkled into a smile as he thought of the prank which those same wholesome girls had played only the day before upon the poor, unsuspecting city maiden.

"I wonder if she will ever forgive them when she finds out that it was all a joke. She'll probably be very indignant at first. Well," he added, as he turned away and put on his great coat preparing to take his daily constitutional into town, "this winter's experience will prove of what fiber the girl is really

made, and, somehow, in spite of her present snobbishness and vanity, I have faith in her."

Meanwhile Geraldine, up in her pleasant room, was seated in an easy chair close to the fire on the hearth. She was reading the letters, which were from her two best girl friends.

Out of the first letter that Geraldine opened there fluttered a kodak picture. A pretty yet weak face smiled out at her. It was Muriel Ellingworth and it had been taken at the Public Baths. Tom Blakely was also in the picture and, as Geraldine well knew, Muriel's mother had forbidden her daughter to go either with that boy or to the public bathing pool.

In a languid scrawl, the letter assured her "dearest" friend that she was just terribly missed and suggested that Geraldine run away.

"I do wish I had some money to send to you, poor dear, but I haven't. I spent the last penny of my allowance buying a pair of silk stockings. They are simply adorable! They have open work edged with gold thread, and of course I had to buy the slippers to match and they have gold buckles. You remember Mother said positively that I must not have them, and so I keep them over at Kittie Beverly's, and when I go out with Tom, I stop there

and put them on. As usual, I was asked what I had done with my allowance, but I was expecting it and had an answer ready. I said that I had given it to the poor babies' milk fund."

Geraldine dropped the letter in her lap and gazed at the fire. Lying was repugnant to her. She had always told the truth fearlessly and had taken the consequences. Then she continued reading the indolent scrawl: "Oh, Gerry dear, I have another piece of news to tell you. Adelaine Drexel took it upon herself to preach to me the other day after school. She told me that if I continued to meet boys and go to public baths and places like that, she feared that I would be asked to leave the seminary. And then, if you please, the minx told me that she hoped the advice would be taken as kindly as it was given. I told her in my best French to mind her own business, and I haven't spoken to her since, and if you are *my* friend, you will snub her too. She is expecting a letter from you, but if I hear that you have written her I shall know that you have taken her side against your devoted Duckie Muriel."

Again Geraldine gazed in the fire. All these dishonorable things looked so different in cold black and white. When Muriel herself was telling them

in her vivacious, chattery manner, they didn't seem half so, well, yes, dishonest was the word, and Geraldine had inherited her father's scorn for dishonesty.

With a sigh she opened the other letter and read the pretty, evenly written words:

"Dear little neighbor who is so far away. You can't think how lonely it seems to have the big house next door closed up so tight. Every morning I go to the window hoping to wave you a greeting in the old way, but all I see is a drawn curtain and a snow-piled ledge. How suddenly everything happened! Truly, Geraldine, I do envy you. One can have such a nice time in a village and I have the dearest cousin living in Sunnyside. You have often heard me speak of Doris Drexel, but you were away last year when she visited me. I'll write a little note of introduction, and I do wish that you would take it today and call upon my dear Cousin Doris. Tell her that you are the friend I love most and that we have been chums ever since our doll days, though truly my doll days aren't over yet. I have the tenderest feeling for Peggoty Anne and I tell her all my secrets.

"You will be sorry to hear that Muriel and I are not on speaking terms. I did not mean to hurt her, but she thinks I did. Now, dear little neighbor, do write real soon to your loving, lonesome friend.

"ADELAINE."

And so she had to choose between them. How different the two girls were, she mused. Both sixteen, but one was vain and pretty, thinking only of clothes and boys, while the other, still a little girl at heart, told secrets to her doll.

Geraldine smiled as she remembered the Christmas when that doll had first arrived. What happy times she and Adelaine had had together. They had been playmates for years, and what a loyal friend her little neighbor had always been. Springing up from her chair, she opened her desk as she thought, "I'll write to Adelaine this very moment and tell her that I am just as lonely for her as she is for me."

For the next half hour, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire and the scratching of the pen. Geraldine had made her choice.

When the letter was finished, the girl arose and slipped on her beautiful blue velvet coat with its deep squirrel fur collar and cuffs and a jaunty blue

velvet cap. Then, going down the hall, she tapped on a closed door.

"Who's there?" the voice sounded as though it came from the depths of many cushions, as indeed it did, for Alfred, buried among them on his lounge, was reading an absorbing story.

"Brother, I wish you would drive me into the village. I have a letter that I would like to mail today."

The door was flung open and the lad exclaimed: "I'll tell you what, Sis! Let's walk to town! It's glorious weather and Dad told me especially that he wanted us to tramp about the way he did when he was a boy."

Geraldine pouted. "Oh, Alfred," she said, "you know I don't like to walk, and certainly you wouldn't expect me to wade through snow drifts like a country girl. I do wish I had stayed in the city. When I wanted to go anywhere, all I had to do was ring for Peters and he brought around the car."

The lad was getting into his great coat, and he said wheelingly:

"I feel like taking a hike today, Sis. Try it once, just to please me, won't you? Be a good pal."

Geraldine hesitated. "Well, just this once," she

said. Then Alfred, happening to look down at her daintily shod feet, laughed gaily. "But, my dear girl!" he exclaimed. "You certainly couldn't walk through snow drifts with those slipper things on. Trot along and put on the hiking shoes that Dad bought for you, and I'll see if I can unearth some leggins."

"But those shoes are so heavy," Geraldine protested, "and I'm sure I don't know where you could get leggins, whatever they are."

"Never you mind, Sis, you do as little Alfred asks this once; I'll be back in a jiffy."

True to his word, the lad reappeared as soon as the strong hiking shoes were on, and triumphantly he held aloft a pair of warm knitted leggins. "Alfred Morrison," cried the horrified girl, "do you expect me to wear those ugly things? Why, I'd be the laughing stock of Dorchester if I appeared in thick woolen stockings like those."

"But, Sister mine, geographically speaking, Dorchester and Sunnyside are so far apart that your exclusive friends are not likely to see you today."

At last Geraldine stood arrayed in the first pair of heavy shoes and leggins she had ever worn. As they were walking along the sparkling highway, the

boy asked, "Who have you been writing to? Dad?"

"No, to Adelaine Drexel. I had a letter from her this morning, and oh, Buddy, I forgot to tell you, Adelaine writes that she has a first cousin living in this town. I am so thankful to find that after all there is at least one girl of my own set in this dreadful place, but what I would like to know is, why didn't she call upon me instead of those——"

"Butter churners and milkmaids," Alfred finished for her.

Geraldine, who had been carefully picking her way through a snowdrift, trying to step just where her brother did, happened to look up suddenly and saw the shoulders of the boy ahead shaking with silent laughter. Before she could ask the cause of this, sleigh bells were heard back of them and a merry voice called: "Ho there. Alfred Morrison! Through stage for Sunnyside! Any passengers wish to ride?"

Jack Lee and Bob Angel were beaming down from the high seat of a delivery sleigh belonging to the father of the latter boy.

Bob often assisted his father after school hours, sometimes acting as clerk in the busy little grocery, or again doing the rural delivering.

Geraldine was indignant. "Ride with a grocer boy? Indeed not!" she was thinking. "Probably a brother to one of the milkmaids." She flushed angrily when she saw Alfred turn back and answer the salutation with a hearty, "Hullo there, boys. Sure thing, I'd like to ride! Would you, Geraldine?"

The girl drew herself up haughtily as she said in a low tone: "A Morrison ride in a delivery cart? Never."

Bob, not having heard a word of the conversation, stopped the horse, and Jack, leaping down from the high seat, snatched off his hat and acknowledged the introduction to Geraldine with as much courtesy as a city boy would have done; and what was more, the girl's eyes, even though they were disdainful, quickly perceived that Jack was unusually good looking.

So, too, was the beaming face of the driver, who called pleasantly: "Miss Morrison, please pardon me for not getting out, but my steed is restless today. Our conveyance is not a fashionable one, I know, but if you will honor us, we will gladly take you to your destination." Geraldine hardly knew how to reply. This boy seemed nice, but of course he belonged to the trades-people, and—Bob was again

speaking: "Why don't you let me drive you over to our house? The girls are having a sewing bee, I think they call it. Doris Drexel and all the rest of them are there."

Geraldine looked up brightly: "Thank you," she said, "I would like to go."

If the seven girls seated around the fireplace in the pleasant Angel library had known that the haughty Geraldine was unconsciously about to return their call, they would have been filled with consternation for fear the joke they played upon her would be found out.

CHAPTER IX.

A RETURNED CALL

FIFTEEN minutes later as the delivery sleigh turned into the drive of the unpretentious Angel home, Betty Byrd, who sat near the window, declared: "Here come the boys." Then she uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it, Betty?" the others asked, springing up and crowding about her.

"Girls!" Doris exclaimed tragically. "Something terrible is just about to happen. Alfred Morrison and his sister, Geraldine, are in the sleigh. What shall we do? Of course she will recognize us and more than likely she will be mad as a hornet, and we can't much blame her if she is."

The girls were filled with consternation, but before they could form a plan, the front door opened and Bob's cheery voice called: "Ho, Sis, where are you?" So of course Bertha had to go into the hall

and he introduced her to the haughty young damsel. Luckily, Geraldine could not see very clearly, having just come in from the dazzling sunlight.

After laying aside her fur-lined coat, the unexpected guest was led into the library, where six anxious maidens stood about the fireplace. Peggy declared afterwards that she didn't see how Bertha ever got through the introductions so calmly. She was just sure that she would have called someone Matilda Jane Turnip.

Of course, Geraldine greeted Doris with utmost warmth and sat beside her as she exclaimed: "Oh, Miss Drexel, I had a letter from your cousin Adelaine this morning, and she was so eager to have me meet you. We are next-door neighbors and have been the best of friends for years. I wonder why I never met you before."

"Probably because my mother is an invalid and we have been in California and Florida so much of the time. I am ever so glad to know a friend of Adelaine's. She is the dearest girl, isn't she?"

The two were seated apart by themselves and Doris dreaded the moment when their visitor should recognize them as the seven who had called upon her in milkmaid garb the day before. Once she did

look very steadily at Peggy, and Doris, noticing this, hurriedly asked some question about her city cousin, hoping to keep the guest's thoughts in safe channels.

At last Alfred arose, saying: "Well, Sister, if we are to visit the post office and then walk home before dark, we would better be going."

"Wait just one moment," Bertha urged. "Bob has gone out to hitch up our two-seated sleigh. Oh, here he comes now."

A comfortable, roomy sleigh appeared and Jack said: "Miss Geraldine, may I accompany you? Alfred and Bob may have the driver's seat?"

The girl smilingly consented and then bade each of the maidens a gracious farewell. When the sleigh with its jingling bells and prancing horses was out of sight, the girls sank down on their chairs and one and all uttered some exclamation. Then Merry Lee said: "The question before the house is, did she recognize us?"

"I don't see how she could help recognizing Rose," Peggy said, to tease. "She looks very much as she did as Jerusy."

That pretty maiden took the teasing good-naturedly, then tongues and needles flew, until half an hour later when the boys returned. They were

laughing merrily when they entered the room and bent over the burning log to warm their hands. The girls looked up from their sewing and Peggy asked eagerly: "Tell us the worst! Did Geraldine recognize us?"

"Yes, she did," Bob declared. "She told Jack that she knew Peggy at once. She decided, however, that it had been a good lesson for her and she wished Jack to thank you all for having taught her that people may live in the country and not be backwoodsy or rubes."

"Well, I'm glad she forgives us!" Bertha declared. Then, when the boys had again departed, she added: "But now, to return to the subject we were discussing when we were interrupted. Peggy, have you and Doris found a mystery yet for the Seven Sleuths to unravel?"

"Nary a mystery," Doris confessed, "but it isn't Saturday yet. You remember we were to have a week."

"There might be some kind of a mystery connected with that old Welsley house out on the lake road. If ever a place looked haunted, that one surely does."

"Righto, my dear little Betty, but ghosts and mys-

teries are two different things. Some unhappy old man shot himself in that dismal farmhouse and nobody ever wanted to live there after that; and so it has just fallen to pieces. But everybody knew the old man and just why he was so sad and discouraged, and so there isn't any mystery to it at all, at all."

"Where did the boys go?" Bertha looked up suspiciously. "Heavens, I hope they aren't anywhere around. They might overhear us talking about mysteries and then our new name wouldn't be secret any more."

"They drove out of the yard; I saw them," Betty, still near the window, remarked.

"Jack had a book. Probably that one of Conan Doyle. Perhaps they're going to return it."

Suddenly Bertha dropped her sewing and her eyes were bright "Say, girls, we've wondered a million times where the boys hold their secret meetings, but never once did we even suspect that it *might* be in that dreadful old Welsley place."

"Bertha Angel, I believe you're right. No one would ever interrup them *there.*" Peg shuddered.

"And what better meeting-place for a boys' detective club than an old ruin haunted by a ghost that had committed suicide!" Doris commented.

"Well," Merry sighed, "we're not likely to find out, since our dear parents will not permit us to prowl around at night unless the boys are along to protect us."

Then Peggy had an idea. "Girls," she exclaimed, "we ought to have some kind of a party for Geraldine and Alfred. Let's have a moonlight skating party and a sleigh ride combined, and when we're out that way, let's suggest visiting the old ruin. If the boys refuse, we will know that they don't want us to see what they have in there. If they agree to the plan, then we will know that is *not* where they hold their secret meetings."

"Bright idea!"

"That will be a jolly lark!"

"Hope the haughty Geraldine knows how to skate."

"Ssh! Here come the boys to take us home. We mustn't let them suspect our deep-laid plans. We're some sleuths all right, I'll say."

When the two boys entered the room they found the girls, except the hostess, warmly wrapped and ready to be taken to their homes.

"Isn't the sunset going to be wonderful this evening?" Merry, in the open door, called over her

shoulder. Then to the boys: "When is our next full moon? We girls thought we'd have our annual skating and sleigh ride party then, and invite the newcomers."

"Great!" Jack cried. "It ought to be soon. What say, Bob?"

"Sure thing!" that ruddy-cheeked lad agreed. Then to the girl he was assisting into the sleigh, he said in a low voice: "Rosie, may I have the first skate and the last, and all in between?"

"No whispering allowed," Merry warned as they climbed in, the girls sitting two and three deep.

The blizzard had disappeared as completely as though it never had been, but the high snowbanks that lined the road and reached to the window sills of the houses remained to testify that it had been "some storm," as Bob said.

"Well, we sure have it to thank for a week of good times instead of school," Merry declared. "I hope Miss Preen and Professor Lowsley enjoyed being snowed in together."

Much laughter greeted this remark, but Gertrude said rebukingly: "I think it's shabby of us to make fun of those two. Of course they *are* sort of queer

looking outside, but in their hearts and souls they may be just like the rest of us."

"Trudie, dear, it wouldn't take a detective to know that *you* are a minister's daughter," Merry remarked, then, as the sleigh was stopping in front of her home, she added: "Now, everybody decide what to take to the skating party. We'll find out about the moon and make our final plans tomorrow. All of you come over to my house. Tra-la. Good night!"

CHAPTER X.

WANTED—A HOUSEKEEPER

MEANWHILE Colonel Wainright was facing a new problem. While living alone he had needed very little waiting on, a faithful Chinese cook had provided his meals, and the wife of his hired man had come in daily from their quarters over the stables to clean the house, but the O'Haras had decided to return to Ireland. Geraldine, of course, was absolutely helpless and the Colonel decided that what he needed was a refined and somewhat elderly housekeeper, one who would be a good influence in the home. Just where to find such a person he could not think at first, but he happened to recall his old friend Mrs. Thompson, who had transformed her fine house on Hickory lane, not far from the girls' seminary, into a home for old ladies. It wasn't a charitable plan, exactly; it was a home for homeless old ladies of some means whose last days would be

made far happier there than they could be elsewhere. Mrs. Thompson, herself, retained a large front room overlooking the beautiful grounds, and spent her summers there; winters she lived either in Europe or with her son in New York. But only that day he had seen in the paper that for some reason Mrs. Thompson was spending a few weeks at her country home, and the courtly old gentleman decided to visit her and ask her advice about how best to solve the problem with which he was confronted.

An hour later he was walking under the leafless hickory trees that formed a veritable grove surrounding a very large turreted wooden house, one of the oldest in the village. A pleasant-faced little old woman answered his ring, ushered him into the small reception room, and went to summon Mrs. Thompson. He had not long to wait, for his elderly friend, dressed in a simple black silk, as she had been all through the years since her husband had died, soon appeared and greeted him graciously. After explaining that her return had been because of a need for quiet and simpler fare than she could obtain easily in her son's New York home, the old gentleman explained his mission, telling how he had

unexpectedly acquired a family and so had need of a housekeeper. Before his story was finished, he knew by the brightening expression in the fine face of the old lady that she had someone in mind to suggest. Nor was he wrong.

"I believe Mrs. Gray is just the one for you," she told him. "She admitted you just now." Then before Mr. Wainright could reply, Mrs. Thompson continued: "Mrs. Gray came to us recently, during my absence. I know nothing at all about her past life; we ask no questions here. It is, as you know, merely a home boarding-house for gentlewomen. I asked Mrs. Gray this morning if she were happy with us, and she said, with a wistful expression on that unusually sweet face of hers, that she was afraid she never would be entirely contented without a home to keep, and she asked me if she might go down in the kitchen now and then and stir up a pudding or something. Now my theory is that she is a born housekeeper and just the one you need."

Colonel Wainright agreed, and the little old lady who longed to putter about a kitchen was called and the proposition was made to her. The other two knew by the brightening of her softly wrinkled face that she was delighted to accept. The Colonel

had told about the two Morrison "children," as he called them, who had come to spend the winter with him, and by the tender light that glowed in her eyes he was assured that she loved young people and would have for them an understanding sympathy.

"Mrs. Gray," he said, when the arrangements had been completed, "there is about you a haunting suggestion of someone whom I once knew. Ever since you admitted me an hour ago I have been trying to think who it is that you resemble, but I have given it up."

The little old lady smiled pleasantly as she replied: "It does seem that everywhere I go, folks think I look like somebody they've known."

"Well, that's about all there is to it," the old man acknowledged. "I have had the same thing happen to me. Judge Crow, up in Dorchester, and I are supposed to be doubles." Then, holding out his hand, first to one and then another of the old ladies, he expressed his deep gratitude to them both, ending with a promise to send for Mrs. Gray and her baggage that very afternoon.

And so it happened that on the third day after the arrival of the young people, another member was added to their household. Colonel Wainright

had welcomed the little old lady and had at once introduced her to Geraldine and Alfred, then he had walked to town, leaving them to their own devices.

It was quite evident that Geraldine's good humor of the day before had departed, for she acknowledged the introduction with a barely perceptible nod and had risen at once to go to her own room. Never before had she been *introduced* to a housekeeper as though she were one of her own class. Colonel Wainright was certainly old-fashioned. Servants were servants, she considered, whatever they were called.

Alfred, who had promised to go skating with Jack and Bob, had welcomed the old lady in the friendliest manner, and she knew at once that she was going to love the boy, but the girl—that was quite a different matter.

The Colonel had shown the housekeeper to her pleasant room overlooking the orchard when her trunk and bags had been taken there; he had also introduced her to Ching Lee, the plump, smiling Chinaman in the kitchen. When she was quite alone, the old lady stood by a window in her room gazing out at a sparkling snow-covered scene, and her eyes were misty. How happy she had been

when the Colonel had told her she was to make a home, a real home, for a boy and girl. One of the unfulfilled desires of her life was to have had grandchildren. She blinked a bit, then wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and smiled at the scene before her. "Well," she comforted herself by thinking, "I'll pretend these two are my grandchildren, and I'll treat them just as lovingly as though they really were, and I'll begin that game right now."

Putting a clean white apron over her soft grey dress, she went down the wide upper hall toward the front room, which was Geraldine's.

Meanwhile that rebellious girl was unpacking her trunk in a manner which showed that it was a most distasteful task. Never before had she lifted her finger to wait on herself. Susan, her maid, had always done everything for her. She had asked her father to permit her to bring Susan to Sunnyside with her, but he had said that he could not ask his old friend to take three people into his home. As she thought of this injustice, her anger mounted higher and higher, and she took things from her trunk and actually threw them over the bed, chairs and lounge. Every conceivable spot was littered when there came a tap on the door.

"Come in!" the girl said sullenly, supposing that it was her brother who wished to speak with her. Instead a smiling little old lady opened the door.

"Why, Geraldine, child," she said kindly, "you *are* busy, aren't you? Unpacking and hanging things up is quite an undertaking, but I think folks like to do it themselves, then they know where things were put."

The girl's face reddened in very evident displeasure. "Well, *I* don't like it," she said coldly, "and I don't see why I should have to. I've *always* had a maid to wait on me, and I've simply got to have one. Now that you've come, I suppose you'll make my bed and keep my room in order."

The old lady had had a talk with the Colonel about this very matter, and he had definitely said that waiting on the girl was *not* one of her duties, explaining that Mr. Morrison had especially requested that she learn how to care for herself. Very quietly Mrs. Gray replied: "No, little girl, that is ***not*** one of my duties."

Then, as the front door bell was ringing, the housekeeper went to answer it. Geraldine, standing among the confusion and litter, watched the retreat with flashing eyes.

"Little girl, indeed! Our housekeeper always addressed me as Miss Geraldine. Country ways and country servants are certainly hard to understand."

Her torrent of angry thoughts was interrupted by a sweet voice calling: "Geraldine, two girls are coming up to see you."

Geraldine looked around the room wildly, but before she had time to decide what she could do to prevent the girls from entering, they were standing in the open door.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Drexel and Miss Lee," the unwilling hostess exclaimed, with a quickly assumed graciousness which had been acquired at the young ladies' select seminary. "Wait until I remove a few dresses from the chairs and I will ask you to be seated."

Doris and Merry exchanged puzzled glances. They felt Geraldine's true attitude of mind, and the former said: "Oh, Miss Morrison, we really ought not to have made so early a morning call, but we have decided to go to the Drexel Lodge on Little Bear Lake tomorrow, and there are so many things to talk about. We did try to telephone, but the line is out of order, but first do let us help you put away your things."

To Geraldine's amazement, the two girls removed their wraps, laughing and chatting the while in a most social fashion.

"I'm going to suggest that we drop formality," Merry said, "and call each other by our first names; and now, Geraldine, I just know that you are ever so tired with unpacking, so you sit here and tell us where you want these dresses hung, and presto, we'll have them up in a twinkling."

"But I cannot permit you girls to wait upon me!" the hostess protested.

"Why not?" Doris inquired. "My mother says that the most beautiful thing that we can do is loving service for one another. Oh, what a darling dress this is! It glows like jewels, doesn't it, Merry?"

The city girl was rather pleased to be showing off her elaborate wardrobe to these village girls, who were evidently quite impressed.

"Oh, that's just one of my party gowns," she said indifferently. "I have several." Then she confessed: "I honestly don't know how to go about hanging them up. I have just stepped out of my clothes and Susan, my maid, has put them away."

"My, how I would hate to have anyone tagging *me* around all the time like that," Merry exclaimed,

not any too tactfully. "It would get on my nerves."

Geraldine drew herself up haughtily and bit her lip to keep from replying. Her two guests, with many exclamations of admiration for the dresses, hung them up in the long closet, and then, when that task was finished, Merry announced: "Now I will show you my latest accomplishment, of which I am real proud."

Her chum laughed as she explained: "You see, Geraldine, my mother has a companion, who is also a trained nurse, and last week she taught Merry how to make a bed in hospital fashion, and the next day when I went over to the Lees', Merry had made and unmade her bed seven times trying to get it perfect."

"There's quite a knack to it," that maiden smilingly declared, as she stretched, smoothed and tucked in sheets and blankets. Then as she stood back proudly and surveyed her accomplishment, she said, "Mother thinks my bed-making is a work of art."

Geraldine wanted to say that she did not consider menial labor of any kind an art, but she refrained from making the comment.

Merry sank down in an easy chair by the fireplace

and looked around with a radiant smile. "Everything was cleared away like magic, wasn't it?" she said sociably; then she added philosophically: "If one dreads a thing, that makes the doing of it doubly hard, but when one pretends that it is going to be great fun, it gets done much more quickly; don't you think so, Geraldine?"

Poor Geraldine's head was in a whirl. Somehow she could not adjust herself to the view of things held by these country girls.

The Colonel had told her that Mr. Lee was the wealthiest man in the countryside, and, of course, she knew the financial and social standing of the Drexel family, and yet these girls had been taught that it was a privilege to render loving service and that bed-making was an art.

"Now, we must tell you all of our grand and glorious plans for tomorrow's lark," Doris began as she drew her chair up cosily. Then they chattered about the sleigh ride and the skating party, and when at last the little clock on the mantle chimed the hour of twelve, Merry sprang up and looked out of the window. "Here come the boys!" she said. "I made them promise that they would call for us

at noon. They've been down to the lake to clean off a space on the ice for our skating party."

"I'm so glad, Geraldine, that you like to skate," Doris exclaimed as she slipped on her fur coat. "You'll want to wear your heaviest shoes and leggins on the sleigh-ride party and your oldest, warmest clothes. You won't need to bring anything toward the picnic part. You and Alfred are to be our guests of honor tomorrow. Good-bye."

That night the Colonel, finding Geraldine standing alone in front of the fireplace in the living-room, slipped a fatherly arm about her, saying: "Little girl, I know how hard it is going to be for you to get used to our country ways, and I was just thinking that perhaps you would like to go to Dorchester with me tomorrow and spend the day with your friends."

"Oh, but I couldn't, Uncle-Colonel!" was the unexpected reply, brightly given. "The girls and boys of Sunnyside are giving a welcome party for Alfred and me. It's a sleigh ride out the lake road to the Drexel lodge; then there is to be skating, and a ride home in the moonlight. I never was so interested in anything before in all my life."

"That's good news!" the Colonel replied, deeply

touched because the girl had, almost unconsciously, used the name which he had taught her when she was very small. "Well, some other time you may go with me to the city. I go there often to attend to business matters."

That night after the young people had retired to their rooms, the Colonel and Mrs. Gray exchanged confidences and each felt hopeful that the unfortunate motherless girl was soon to have a change of heart.

CHAPTER XI.

A REBELLIOUS BOY

THE next morning when Colonel Wainright entered the cheery, sun-flooded breakfast-room, he saw a slender girl standing by the window looking out at the glistening white orchard. She turned with a truly radiant face.

"Oh, Colonel," she exclaimed, "isn't this the most wonderful, sparkling day? I will have to confess that I have never seen anything so beautiful in the city, for there, even in the parks, the snow becomes sooty almost as soon as it has fallen."

The elderly gentleman was indeed pleased and he said heartily: "Well, little lady, I am glad that there is at least one thing that you like in our country village. Aha! Here is Alfred. Good morning, lad. I judge by your ruddy face that you have already been out-of-doors."

"Indeed I have," the boy replied as they took their

places at the table. "I saw a chap shoveling and so I went out to help him. Who is he, Colonel? Sort of a surly boy, I thought. He only grunted when I asked if he didn't think the snow was great."

"He is Danny O'Neil," the old gentleman replied. "His father is a tenant on one of my farms and he has had a great deal of trouble with the boy, he tells me. Danny is seventeen and has sort of taken the bit in his mouth. He doesn't want to go to school nor help his father on the farm. Mr. O'Neil came to me yesterday and asked my advice about sending Danny to a reform school. I advised him not to do so unless he feared the boy might do something really criminal. Then I suggested that he send the lad over here to take the place of my man Patrick, who has gone to Ireland to visit his old parents. I thought, perhaps, if Danny were earning good wages, that might straighten him out. I wish you would talk with him, Alfred. I'm sure it would do him good."

"I will, sir," the boy replied. "There must be some reason that doesn't show on the surface for Danny O'Neil's rebelliousness. Perhaps his father doesn't understand him."

Mrs. Gray smiled over the silver coffee urn at the

boy and nodded encouragement. "That often leads to a lot of trouble and unhappiness, as I have reason to know," she replied.

An hour later, true to his promise, Alfred tried to make friends with Danny O'Neil. Having procured another wooden shovel from the tool shed, he was tossing snow from the front walk which had not been entirely cleaned off since the blizzard. He did not wish his efforts to become acquainted with Danny to seem too pointed, and so he had taken this way to make them appear natural, but the other boy was taciturn, giving no information about himself or his plans, answering all direct questions with monosyllables. Discouraged, Alfred was about to give up when he heard the jolly jingling of sleigh bells, and to his surprise saw a two-seated cutter, drawn by a familiar big dapple mare and driven by Bob. Rose sat at his side, while Doris and Jack were on the back seat.

They sang out merry greetings as they approached and came to a halt near where the two boys were working. Jack leaped out and, after a wave of his hand toward the Morrison boy, he turned to the other with, "Hello, old Dan, how are you? I haven't laid eyes on you in twenty moons. Why don't you

ever come around?" adding by way of explanation to Alfred: "Danny O'Neil and I were champion snowballers when we were kids. I always chose him to be on my side when I was captain of the Brick School gang." Then to the still sullen-looking boy, who kept on shoveling: "I haven't seen a thing of you since you stopped going to school. You made a mistake to drop out, Dan." Fearing that he was embarrassing the still silent boy, Jack turned to explain their early visit. "We four are a committee on arrangement. Stopped by to tell you and your sister to be ready along about two. We'll call for you."

Doris, seeing Geraldine in the doorway, skipped up the front steps for a few words, and on her return, seeing that Danny was alone, she stopped and spoke to him in a low voice. "Danny O'Neil," she said, "I've often wished I could see you to tell you how my heart aches for you since your mother died. Every week, when I drove out to your little farm to get fresh eggs for my mother, Mrs. O'Neil was so cheerful and brave, although we know now that she must have been suffering for a long time. She was always telling me that her one desire was to save enough money to send you up to the Dorchester Art

School. She showed me things you drew, Danny. I'm sure you have talent. I hope you'll carry out her wishes. Won't you try, Danny, for her sake?"

The boy for a moment seemed to find it hard to speak, then he said in a tone gruff with emotion: "If I can get hold of any money, I will. It's all that's left, now Ma's gone."

"But, Dan, if you're working for the Colonel, you can save that money, can't you?"

"Not much I can't! The old man gets it paid to him. That's how much *I'll* get it." His voice expressed bitterness and hatred.

Rose was calling and so, with a pitying expression in her eyes, Doris said, "Good-bye, Danny," and skipped away. After they were gone, Alfred tried once more to be friendly, but found the surly lad even less inclined to talk than before, and so he went indoors to prepare for the afternoon frolic.

CHAPTER XII.

A SLEIGH-RIDE PARTY

PROMPTLY at two, Geraldine and Alfred, well bundled in furs, were waiting in the hall when a joyous shouting, ringing of bells and blowing of horns announced that the merry sleigh-ride party was coming up the drive.

Alfred threw open the door and gave an answering halloo, then, turning, he assisted Geraldine down the icy steps.

"I wonder where Danny O'Neil is," the Colonel exclaimed. "I told him to put ashes on the icy places, but he has not done so."

The girls graciously welcomed Geraldine and made room for her on the deep, blanket-covered straw between Doris and Merry.

"This is for you to blow upon," the former maiden said, producing from her coat pocket a small tassled horn.

For one moment Geraldine hesitated. Then, as the two big white horses raced along the snowy road with bells jingling, she soon caught the spirit of merriment and found herself tooting upon a horn as gayly as the rest of them. Never before had she had such a jolly time, and she was actually feeling a bit sorry for the city girls who had never been on a straw ride.

The sun was bright, and long before they reached their destination they could see the ice glistening on Little Bear Lake.

As they drew up at the Inn, to rest the horses a moment before turning up the seldom traveled East Lake Road, Mr. Wiggin, who lived in that lonely spot all the year round with only now and then an occasional guest for a week-end, came out to greet them.

Usually his face beamed when he saw these young people, but today he looked greatly troubled.

"What's up, Mr. Wiggin?" Bob drew rein to inquire. "You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

"Well, I came out to warn you young people you'd better turn back. Old Man Bartlett, who lives a mile up the wood road, was robbed an hour ago. He'd been to town to get five hundred dollars

he had in the bank; got a queer notion that the bank was going to pieces. He had the money in an old bag. Someone must have seen him getting it out of the bank and followed him. Anyway, when he reached the wood road, he was held up and robbed."

"Well, with all the unbroken snow there is about here, it will be easy enough to catch the thief," Bob said.

"You're wrong there!" Mr. Wiggin replied. "Several teams have been along the lake road since the blizzard, and he could walk in the ruts."

"Was poor old Mr. Bartlett hurt?" Gertrude asked anxiously.

"No, not at all. He was blindfolded and tied to a tree, but he worked himself loose before long, but the robber was gone. The old man came right down here and we telephoned to the sheriff. He and his men will be along most any minute now. There may be some shooting, and so I'd advise you boys to take the girls right back to town."

Jack looked anxiously at Merry, who was vigorously shaking her head. "We aren't afraid, are we, girls?"

"Not with all these boys along to protect us," Peg declared.

Then Doris explained: "We're only going as far as our cabin, Mr. Wiggin; that's not more than a mile from here. We'll be all right."

"That crook is probably headed for Dorchester by this time," one of the boys put in. "We don't want to miss our fun for him."

The innkeeper watched the sleighload of young people until they had disappeared over a rise on the East Lake Road. Then he shook his head solemnly and, having entered the inn, he said to his wife: "That's what I call a foolhardy risk. It might be all right for the young fellows if they were alone, but to take a parcel of girls into, nobody knows what, I call it downright foolishness and maybe worse. Why, if they cornered that highwayman, he would shoot, of course, and there's no tellin' who he would hit. Well, not being their guardeen, I couldn't prevent their goin', and so they'll have to take their chance."

Meanwhile the two big white horses were slowly ploughing their way along the east side of the lake. In some spots the road was quite bare where the wind had swept across the fields, but in other places the horses floundered through deep snow drifts. The road, which led close to the lake, was hilly and

winding, and, as it neared the cabin, it entered a dense wood of snow-covered pines.

"Girls, why don't you blow on your horns?" Bob called as he looked back. "There's nothing to be afraid of. That highwayman would make straight for Dorchester, where he could lose himself in the crowd."

Suddenly Merry called out excitedly: "Bob, stop a minute. Look there. That highwayman must have been riding on a horse. If he was, this is where he turned and cut through the pine woods to the old Dorchester road."

Jack and several other boys leaped over the side of the sleigh and followed the tracks for some distance through the woods where there was little snow on the ground.

"Say, boys, I believe Merry's got the right idea," Jack said as he climbed back to his former place next to Geraldine.

"Glad we saw those tracks," Alfred put in. "Now we know for sure that the highwayman won't be lurking around the Drexel cabin."

"Sure thing! Let's proceed to forget about him and have a good time," Bob called in his cheerful

way. "Blow on your horns, girls. Make this silent pine wood ring."

"Ohoo! Isn't it silent, though, and dark, too? Hurry up, Bob. We'll blow hard enough when we get out into the sunshine," Betty Byrd said as she huddled close to Merry.

Peggy took occasion to say to Doris in a low aside that the boys of the "C. D. C." probably thought they now had a mystery to solve, but they wanted the girls to think that they weren't interested.

"That's what I thought," was the whispered reply. "Wouldn't it be great if we solved the mystery first?"

"Say, cut out the secret stuff," one boy across from them called; then, taking his companion's horn, he blew a merry blast. The others did likewise and so noisily they emerged into the sunshine, but some of the girls glanced back at the silent, somber woods as though fearing that the robber had been there all of the time.

Just in front of them and built close to the lake was a picturesque log cabin.

"Hurray for the Drexel Lodge!" someone called.

"You girls stay in the sleigh," Bob said, "while we boys see if the robber is hiding in the cabin."

Five minutes later the lads reappeared. "He certainly isn't here!" Jack declared. "The heavy wooden doors and blinds are all padlocked just as they were left last fall, and there is no other way of entering, so let's forget the highwayman and have the good time we planned."

"Jack is right," Bertha said as she leaped from the sleigh. "Doris, you have the key. Let's open the doors while the boys get wood from the shed. Isn't the ice just great? I can hardly wait to get my skates on, can you, Geraldine?"

The young people were convinced that the highwayman was not in their neighborhood, and, with fear gone, they resumed their merrymaking. The blinds were opened, letting in a flood of sunlight. A big dry log was soon burning on the wide hearth and a fire was started in the kitchen stove.

"Now, girls," Doris announced, "I want you all to go skating with the boys while I prepare our supper."

"Why, won't you be afraid to stay here alone?" Betty Byrd, the timorous, inquired. "I wouldn't do it for worlds."

"No, I'm not afraid," Doris replied. "The house was locked, so why should I be?"

"Sure thing. You're safe enough!" Bob declared. "But if you do get frightened, blow on your horn."

Ten minutes later Doris was alone, or at least she *thought* she was alone in the log cabin.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BAG OF GOLD

Doris sang softly to herself as she busily unpacked the lunch baskets and spread the long table in the living-doom. The tea kettle was soon humming on the stove and bacon was sizzling in the frying pan.

"We'll have an early supper," she was thinking, "and I'm going to suggest that we start home early, too. Our parents will have heard about the holdup and they'll be terribly worried. I do hope Mother, ill as she is, won't hear of it, but of course she won't. That's the advantage of having a trained nurse with her all the time." Then she glanced at her skates lying near the door. "I suppose they're disappointed not to get out on the ice. Well, so am I, but my ankle doesn't feel as strong as I had hoped it would. I turned it a little getting into the sleigh, and I don't

want to sprain it again as I did last winter." She opened a box which Bertha had brought.

"Yum! Yum!" she said aloud. "What delicious tarts!" Then she counted them. "Two apiece! I'm glad they're big ones."

Carrying them into the living-room, she placed them around on the long table, then, stopping to sniff, she darted back into the kitchen to turn the strips of sizzling bacon. A few minutes later she returned to the living-room with a huge plate of sandwiches. Suddenly she stood still and stared at the door of a small closet. She thought she had seen it move just ever so slightly. She knew that it had been locked, for Bob tried it just before he went out to skate.

The crack widened and Doris saw eyes peering out at her. Wildly she screamed, but the windows were closed and no one heard.

She started to run, when a familiar voice called, "Doris, don't be frightened. I won't hurt you. It's Danny O'Neil."

The girl turned in amazement toward the boy to whom she had been talking not six hours before.

"Danny," the girl gasped, "what are you doing here?"

The boy looked around wildly: "I—I was the one who robbed old Mr. Bartlett," he said rapidly. "I didn't set out to do it, Doris! Honest, I didn't! I was just a running away from home. Pa has been so hard on me ever since Ma died, and so I thought I'd clear out of it all, but I didn't have any money. And then this morning, when you told me how Ma wanted me to get money and go to art school, well, I don't know, Doris, what did happen to my brain, but I was just crazy mad to get money and get away from that man who calls himself my father. After you left I started walking to town. I didn't even know I was doing it till I got to the bank. Then I saw Old Man Bartlett stuffing all that money in his handbag and I followed him, hiding behind trees, till he got to the wood road—then—I don't know what I did—knocked him over, I guess. There was a long rope, one end tied to a tree, and I wound it about him, then I took his bag and ran."

"But how did you get in here, Danny? The doors and windows were all locked and we didn't see any tracks."

"I know! I stepped on the places where the snow was blown away and I climbed to the roof and came down the chimney. Then I went in that closet and

locked the door on the inside. But, Doris, I don't want the money. All these long hours there in the dark I've been seeing Mom's face looking at me so reproachful, and she kept saying, 'Danny-boy, you promised me you'd go straight.' If she'd a lived, Doris, I'd have been different, but 'tisn't home without her."

The lad drew his coat sleeve over his eyes, then he said gloomily: "The sheriff will be hunting for me and they'll put me in jail, but anyhow, here's the money. Take it back to Old Man Bartlett and tell him I didn't really mean to rob him. I did it just sudden-like, without thinking."

There were tears in the eyes of the girl and she held out her hand: "Danny," she said, "I know how lonely you've been without your mother and I'll help you. Quick, hide! Someone is coming."

Danny darted back and locked himself in the closet. Doris hid the bag of gold and hurried toward the front door. Someone was pounding and she was sure it was the sheriff.

When Doris opened the heavy wooden door, she found that her surmise had been correct. Mr. Ross, the sheriff, stood without, and waiting near were several other men on horseback.

"Oh, Miss Drexel, it's you, is it?" The sheriff was evidently much surprised. "We saw smoke coming from the chimney and believed that we had cornered our highwayman. Thought he might be hiding here. Of course it would be a daring thing to make a fire in a deserted cabin, but these criminals are a bold, hardened lot. Who else is with you, Miss Drexel? I guess I'll step inside, if you don't mind. No use holding the door open and letting the heat all out."

The sheriff entered and closed the door, then he went to the fireplace and held his hands over the blaze.

Doris's heart was filled with a new fear. What if Danny should make a sound of some sort and betray his hiding place? Hurriedly she said: "All of our crowd is here, Mr. Ross. There are seven boys and as many girls, but the rest of them are out on the ice skating. I remained in the cabin to prepare our supper."

The sheriff straightened and leaned his back against the closet door as he said: "Miss Drexel, because of this robbery, I feel it my duty to tell you and your friends that you would better return to town as soon as you have had your lunch. It gets

dark early these wintry days and there's no telling what might happen."

"Thank you, Mr. Ross," Doris said, "I will tell the boys when they come in."

When the sheriff was gone, the girl closed and bolted the front door, then she tapped on the closet, saying softly: "Come out, Danny. I have a plan to suggest. Bob and the rest of them may be in at any minute."

Then, when the lad appeared, she added: "I want you to take my skates, fling them over your shoulder, and go boldly out of the front door and up the lake road. Anyone, seeing you leave here, will think you are one of our party. Whistle and stride along as though you were out for fun. Half a mile above, as you know, the lake is narrow. Skate across and go back to your work at Colonel Wainright's, but before you go, Danny, promise me that from now on you'll be the kind of a boy your mother wanted you to be."

The lad held out his hand and, with tears falling unheeded, he said huskily: "I give you my word, Doris. You've been my good angel and saved me from noboby knows what."

Then he shouldered the skates and started down

the snowy road with long strides, whistling fearlessly. A load had been lifted from his heart and he was sure that his mother had forgiven him.

Doris watched him until he disappeared beyond a bend in the road and then she breathed a sigh of relief. She heard a stamping without and the laughing young people swarmed into the kitchen.

"Ho, Doris, who was the chap that just went by?" Bob called—but before the girl could reply, something else happened to attract their attention. Bertha, in the kitchen, was crying in dismay: "Where is the cook? What has she been doing? We'll have to discharge her, I'm thinking. The bacon is burned to a cinder."

Doris, thankful indeed for this timely interruption, ran into the kitchen and declared remorsefully: "Oh, isn't that too bad, and I suppose you are all hungry as bears, but luckily I brought an extra supply. Throw that out, Bertha, please, and I'll get some more." Then, as she searched in her basket, she added hurriedly: "I suppose I left it burn while the sheriff was here."

"The sheriff!" was the surprised chorus.

"Why, what did he want?" Jack asked. "He

didn't suppose that we had the highwayman here as one of our guests, did he?"

Doris purposely did not look at any of them as she put the strips of bacon into the pan which Bertha had prepared. "Oh, Sheriff Ross and his men were just passing by," she said with an effort at indifference, "and so he thought he would stop and ask us if we had any idea where the bold robber might be."

"He is wasting his time," Bob declared. "I am positive that Dorchester holds his man by this time."

Peggy and Dick Jensen entered the kitchen at this moment and the girl exclaimed: "Oh, Doris, I've had bad luck. I broke one of my straps, but since you aren't going to skate today, may I take one of yours?"

What could Doris say? How could she explain the absence of her skates? She was busy at the stove and she pretended that she had not heard—but before the other girl could repeat her question, Bob called: "Here's one for you, Peg. I always carry an extra strap in my pocket."

Doris againn breathed a sigh of relief, but it was a short one, for, a second later, she thought of something which set her heart to throbbing wildly.

The bag of gold! She had hidden it under a cushion on one of the chairs when the sheriff was knocking.

The seven boys were now in the living-room and she heard Bob teasingly say: "Jack, you're the oldest. Sit down in this grandfather's chair and see what you're coming to."

That old-fashioned armchair was the very one where the bag of gold was hidden. In another moment Jack would be sitting on it.

"Here, Bertha!" Doris called wildly. "Please turn the bacon. I must sit down for a moment. I feel faint!"

Rushing into the living-room, the girl sank into the grandfather's chair just as Jack was about to occupy it.

"Why, Doris," Dick exclaimed, "you look as white as a sheet! Are you ill?"

"I guess it must have been the heat from the stove or—or something," was the vague reply. Doris was thinking wildly. How could she get the money from beneath the chair cushion with thirteen boys and girls bringing her water and watching her every move with troubled solicitude.

The skating party, which had started out so mer-

rily, seemed destined to be a succession of troubled events. The boys and girls, gazing anxiously at the pale face of their friend, had not the slightest suspicion of the real facts, supposing only that Doris was suddenly faint.

"Perhaps it is caused by the wrench that you gave your ankle this morning," Bertha said; then added self-rebukingly: "I had completely forgotten it, Doris, or I would not have permitted you to stand for the past hour and prepare our supper."

The object of their solicitation, believing that for the time being the gold was safe, smiled up at them as she exclaimed brightly: "Oh, I'm just lots better now. Please, all of you sit down and eat your lunch or the bacon will be cold instead of burned. I'll just sit here and watch you. Why, yes, thank you, Bob, I would like a cup of cocoa," she added to the lad who offered to bring it.

While Doris was slowly sipping the hot drink, she closely watched the others as they sat about the table and began to pass the tempting viands. When she believed that no one was observing her, she slipped a hand down under the cushion of the chair and grasped the bag of gold. Then, hiding it under her apron, she arose to carry her cup to the kitchen.

Bob sprang to assist her, but Doris laughingly waved him back. "I'm as good as new, Bobbie," she said. "I'll be right back, so save me some food."

Upon reaching the kitchen she looked around hastily to see where she could again hide the money. A drawer being partly open, she thrust the bag to a far corner and, with a sigh of relief, she went into the living-room and sank down on the part of the long bench which had been reserved for her.

Bob looked at her curiously. It seemed strange to him that after a fainting spell one could suddenly be so ravenously hungry, but he said nothing and tried with his usual witty nonsense to make the meal a merry one.

It was just as they were rising from the table that Bob saw something that caused him to stare in amazement. Luckily no one noticed him as the girls were good-naturedly disputing about the matter of dish-washing, and the boys were donning their great coats and caps preparing to return to the ice.

What Bob saw was the door of the closet standing ajar, and well he knew that when they had first arrived, the door had not only been locked but the key had been nowhere in evidence.

What could it mean? he wondered, and again he glanced curiously at Doris.

Then he said with assumed gaiety: "Girls, stop squabbling and get into your things and go skating with the boys. I'll remain in the cabin and help Doris repack the baskets. Since she cannot skate, I'll stay and be her brave and bold protector."

When they were alone the lad turned to the girl, whom he had known since her baby days, and he said kindly: "Now, Doris, tell me what is troubling you. What has happened?"

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO CONSPIRATORS

Doris, knowing that she could trust Bob, made him promise eternal secrecy and then she told him the whole story, withholding only the name of the highwayman.

The lad was indeed surprised at this sudden turn of affairs and he said at once: "You don't need to tell me who it is, Doris. I know it was Tom Duffy. He was expelled from High last week and he said he was going to skip the town."

Doris wondered if she ought to deny this, but, desiring to shield Danny, she said nothing at the time.

Bringing forth the bag of gold, she gave it to the boy.

He concealed it in the deep pocket of his heavy overcoat; then he said: "Now, Doris, you just leave it to me. I'll find some way to return this to the old

man tonight so that he may be relieved of his worrying. I'll wait for a hunch."

Then, as the work of tidying the kitchen was finished, Bob exclaimed: "Now bundle up, Doris, I'll draw you on the sled while I skate. We can't let you miss all of the fun."

They were greeted with jolly shouts when they appeared, and Dick Jensen slid up to them, stopping only to do a double figure eight, in which accomplishment he excelled. Then, taking the rope of the sled from Bob's warmly gloved hand, he said: "I'll be Doris' pony. I'm sure she would rather have me, and, if I'm not mistaken, you'll find Rose waiting for you beyond the point."

Bob's face lighted. It was understood among these young people that some day, when they were older, Rose and Bob would be engaged, and since it was the only real romance in their midst, they all took a delighted interest in it.

For an hour the gleaming ice was the picture of a merry mid-winter frolic, but, as soon as the sun began rapidly to descend to the horizon, Bob took Rose's horn and blew thereon a long, clear blast, while the maiden at his side, with cheeks as glowing

as her ruddy name flower, beckoned the skaters shoreward.

"Time to be going!" Bob called as they flocked in. "The sky is so cloudy, the moon won't be able to light us home, so we'll try to make it before dark."

Half an hour later the cabin had been securely locked, the sleigh filled with merrymakers, and the horses eager to be away after their long rest in the shelter of a shed.

It was nearly dark when the inn was reached. Mr. Wiggin appeared in the door to exclaim, "Well, I'm mighty glad to see you young folks headed for town. My wife's been worrying the whole afternoon, knowing that highwayman was still at large. The sheriff and his men found some tracks just back of the inn leading toward the pine wood." Merry put in excitedly: "Oh, Mr. Wiggin, if that robber was riding a horse, we know where he turned toward the old Dorchester road." But the innkeeper shook his head.

"No, he was afoot, old man Bartlett said. Hal Spinney, from the milk farm, went by a spell earlier on horseback."

"How is Mr. Bartlett now?" Gertrude asked solicitiously.

"Well, he's pretty much all in," Mr. Wiggin replied sympathetically. Then, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, he said in a low voice, as though not wishing to be heard: "My wife wouldn't hear to his going back to his shack up in the woods, so she's got him in there by the fire. He's pretty hard hit, as you can guess, that five hundred dollars being his lifetime savings."

Bob was thinking hard. Now was the time to give the money back to Old Man Bartlett, but he had promised Doris that he would not tell how she had procured it. He thought it queer that the girl should care to protect that ne'er-do-well of a Tom Duffy; nevertheless he had given his word and would keep it. Jack was driving and was about to start the horses when Bob called: "Wait a minute, Jack, will you? I'd like to take a look at those tracks. Mr. Wiggin, I'm a shark at recognizing shoeprints. I wish you'd show them to me."

The girls, who were not in the secret, smiled at each other knowingly. This carried out their theory that the members of the "C. D. C." were trying to solve the mystery of the highwayman.

"Sure thing. I'll show them to you," the garru-

lous innkeeper replied. "Wait till I get a lantern. Dark's settling down fast."

A couple of the other boys climbed out of the sleigh, idly curious, and accompanied Bob and Mr. Wiggin, who had reappeared with a lighted lantern. Doris clenched her hands together nervously under the buffalo rope. That Bob had his "hunch" she was sure, but what he was about to do, she could not guess.

Five minutes passed, and ten; then the boys returned greatly excited. They were all talking at once. "What happened?" Merry called out.

"Happened?" Dick Jensen exclaimed. "The money's been found. Mr. Wiggin stumbled right over that bag of gold. The robber must have been frightened and dropped it in the snow close to his tracks. Every cent of it was there."

"O, thank goodness!" Gertrude exclaimed. "Now the old man can stop worrying."

Mr. Wiggin held the lantern up, his round face glowing. "It sure was a lucky thing that Bob, here, wanted to look at those tracks," he said. "No telling but what that robber might have come back in the night, knowing where he had dropped it."

"Do hurry in, Mr. Wiggin, and give it to old Mr.

Bartlett," Doris begged, and if there was an unusual tenseness in her voice, none of the others noticed it. Bob glanced meaningly in her direction as he sat beside his Rose, and Doris, who had been silent before that, suddenly became the life of the party. "Oh, boys, please change your minds about taking us right home," she pleaded. "We girls want to turn up the wood road just a little distance."

"Why, Doris Drexel," Betty Byrd cried in evident alarm, "*what* a wild suggestion! Why in the world should we want to go up the very road where the robbery took place!"

"That's what I'd like to know!" Bertha began, then she remembered that Doris' suggestion was merely the carrying out of their plan to try to discover if the boys of the "C. D. C." held their secret meetings in the old Welsley "haunted" house. If the boys were willing to take the girls through the old ruin, it would mean that it was *not* their meeting place.

"Oh, yes—do let's go!" Bertha then seconded.

"All right," Jack sang out willingly. "I'll have to back up a little. We've passed the wood road."

"O, girls," Merry gave Doris and Bertha a wink of understanding, "let's go there some other time.

I think we've given our guests of honor enough thrills for tonight."

To which Geraldine heartily agreed, and so the horses were turned out upon the highway. When the girls had been left at their homes, the boys laughed and shouted as though at a good joke. The girls would indeed have been mystified if they had heard them.

CHAPTER XV.

A BOY'S REPENTANCE

DANNY O'NEIL, meanwhile having skated across the lake, had returned to his work as he had promised Doris that he would.

The Colonel was away and the lad hurriedly did the tasks expected of him. When these were finished, he went to his barren room over the garage, and, throwing himself down on his bed, he sobbed and sobbed. "Oh, Mom," he said aloud, "I don't know how I'm going to get on without you. There's nobody now that cares, but I promised you I'd be brave and go straight, and I'll try, Mom, but it's hard, hard!"

There was a light tap on the door and the boy sat up and hurriedly drew his coat sleeve over his eyes. Then he rose and opened it. There stood the dearest little old lady, dressed in gray. She was smiling at

him in a most loving way and she said: "Danny, I'm the Colonel's new housekeeper. I want to look after everyone living on the place, and so I came out to see what I can do for you."

The lad wondered if this little woman had heard what he, believing himself to be alone, had said but a moment before. Mrs. Gray had indeed heard and she longed to take the lonely, motherless boy in her arms and try to comfort him, but, since she could not do this, she hurriedly planned to try in some measure to fill the place of the dear one the lad had so recently lost.

Mrs. Gray took the Colonel into her confidence and that kindly man said: "Well, well, I might have known how lonely the boy would be without his mother. I remember how proud she was of him, and, come to think of it, she asked me at one time if there wasn't some school where he could go without much expense and study drawing. She said he was always making pictures on his books or on anything that was handy, and it caused a good deal of trouble between the boy and his father, because Mr. O'Neil declared that only a shiftless, no account would idle his time away making pictures. I'm glad

you spoke to me about the lad, Mrs. Gray. I'll send for him this evening perhaps, and have a talk with him. In the meantime, do anything you wish to make his quarters more comfortable."

That very morning, at the housekeeper's request, the Colonel sent Danny on an errand which would necessitate his being away for several hours.

During that time two easy chairs that were not needed in the big house were taken to the boy's room in the garage. Curtains made of colored prints were hung at the windows and another piece covered the bureau on which stood a picture of the mother who had so loved her son.

Mrs. Gray, with the Colonel's permission, looked through his library and found several books that a boy would enjoy, "Ivanhoe," "The Last of the Mohicans," and a complete set of the writings of Mark Twain.

These, with a few pictures, gave the room, formerly so barren, a pleasant, home-like appearance.

The little woman was busily renovating the lad's bed when Danny returned.

"Mrs. Gray," he said, and there was a catch in his voice, "have you been doing all this just for me?"

"Why of course Danny-boy," that little woman replied brightly. "What is a housekeeper for, if not to make things cheerful and tidy?" Then she hurried on to say, "The Colonel would like you to come to his study tonight at eight."

When the boy was alone, he stood gazing out at the snowy fields, although he did not see them. He was wondering if by any chance the Colonel had heard of the highway robbery, and was going to rebuke him, perhaps discharge him.

Half an hour later he was called to the house by Mrs. Gray. "You're wanted at the phone," she said. "It's a lassie with a sweet voice as is askin' for you," she added.

The boy was sure that it must be Doris who wished to speak to him, and he was right. "Danny, come over to my house tonight at eight o'clock promptly. I have something important to tell you."

The lad turned away. Perhaps Doris knew that the sheriff was again on his trail and wanted to warn him. What should he do, and how could he explain his absence to the Colonel?

As Danny was leaving the telephone, he met the housekeeper, who smiled at him pleasantly.

"Mrs. Gray," the boy said, "a friend has just called up and asked me to be in town tonight at eight. Do you think the Colonel would be willing to see me at another hour?"

"I'm sure of it," the little old lady replied. "He is alone in his study now. Wait here, Danny, and I will ask him."

A moment later she returned and told the boy that the Colonel would see him. Almost fearfully the lad entered the pleasant room, where the walls, lined with books, statues and paintings, told the artistic and literary taste of the gentleman who spent there many quiet hours each day. The kindly welcome that Danny received banished his fear, and when he left the study half an hour later, in his heart there was a new hope and a strengthened resolve. He whistled as he tramped into town that evening, and when Doris opened the door at his ring, his radiant face was so unlike the one she had last seen in the cabin, she marveled at the change.

"Do tell me what has happened," she said as soon as they were seated.

"It's almost too wonderful to believe," the boy exclaimed. "It seems that last year my mother asked

the Colonel's advice about sending me to some inexpensive art school, and today he told me that if I still desired to go, he would help me accomplish that end. I'm to prove that I can stick at a thing by working for him faithfully all winter and then, in the spring, he will permit me to go to the Dorchester Art Institute. The days will be long, and I can be up with the birds and work in the garage and garden before I go to the city and again when I return. I want to do commercial drawing of some sort." Then the boy paused and a deep flush mounted his face. "Good Angel," he said, "I forgot that you probably think of me as a criminal and a highwayman."

"Indeed I do not," Doris protested. "I'm so happy for you, and I just know that you will make good, but, Danny, you haven't asked me about the gold. I want you to know that it has been returned."

The boy's sensitive face expressed his great relief, then, unexpectedly, tears brimmed his eyes. "Doris," he said, "the rest of my life will not be long enough to atone for that terrible wrong. I hope I may be able to do a real service for that old man some day."

"I know you will, Danny," the girl put her hand

lightly on his arm. "Now, I want you to promise me that we will never again mention or even think of what happened. Promise me, Danny."

Before the boy could reply, the door bell had pealed and laughing voices were heard without. The lad rose at once.

"Danny, don't go!" Doris urged. "Geraldine and Alfred and some of the others are out there, and they would be glad to meet you."

The brightness left the boy's face, and he said bitterly, "You are wrong, Good Angel. Geraldine Morrison has never spoken a pleasant word to me. You must remember I am only their gardener."

The bell was ringing insistently and so Doris swung open the door. A laughing crowd of girls and boys trooped into the hall. Danny tried to leave but Bob stopped him.

"Hello, Dan," he said good-naturedly, "don't hurry away on our account. The more the merrier, you know."

"Have you met Miss Morrison?" he asked, then quickly added: "Of course you have. I forgot at the minute that you both live at the Colonel's."

Geraldine, pretending not to have heard her name,

was talking to Doris and her back was toward the boys.

Bob noticed this, and then he realized that the proud city girl might consider Danny's position in the Wainright home a menial one.

"Sorry you are going, Dan," Alfred now came forward. "Why don't you wait and ride home with Sis and me?"

"Thanks," the other replied as he reached for his great coat. "I think I would better be going now."

Suddenly there was a crashing noise in their midst, and a loosely wrapped bundle containing a pair of skates fell to the floor from beneath Danny's coat.

"Why, Doris," Peggy exclaimed in astonishment, "those are your skates, aren't they? This morning when I asked if I might borrow them, you said you weren't able to find them."

Bob hurried to the rescue. "Guess you must have left them in the sleigh. Good thing Danny found them for you. Well, so long, old man, if you must go. See you again."

When the Irish boy had gone Doris glanced at Bob, wondering if he had surmised that Danny

O'Neil was the real highwayman, but that boy said nothing to confirm her suspicion that evening nor ever after. However, Bob did know, and he determined that he would do all he could to help Danny O'Neil.

"Take off your things and stay a while," Doris urged, but Merry shook her head. "No, we just came to get you. We're so noisy when we're all together, I know we would disturb your mother. Mums and Dad have gone to a concert and good old Katie doesn't mind how much noise we make, so put on your duds and let's go through the hedge. Jack shoveled a path today from your door to ours. One of his daily good deeds."

The Drexels and Lees were next-door neighbors with a pine hedge between them, but of course there was a gate in it.

Fifteen minutes later they were in the big comfortable Lee library with the victrola turned on. Jack at once asked Geraldine to dance with him, and since she thought him nicest of all the boys, she was pleased to accept. After a time he led her to the settee in front of the fireplace, on which a log was burning. "I'd rather talk a while," he said, but,

instead of talking, he sat looking into the fire. Geraldine, glancing at him, thought how good-looking he was. At last she asked lightly, "Are your thoughts worth a penny?" Then she added, "I don't believe that you even know that you are here."

The boy laughed as he replied: "I will have to confess that my thoughts had taken me far away. I was traveling years into the future when you recalled me to the present."

Then, because of the girl's very evident interest, the lad continued: "Dad and I had a heart to heart talk this morning. He thinks that if I plan taking up his business of building and contracting, I would better begin to specialize along those lines, but I told him that, first of all, I want to go West and try cattle ranching."

"Oh, Jack, what a dreadful thing to do!" the girl protested.

The boy's face was radiant as he replied: "You are mistaken. It's great out there!"

But it was quite evident that his companion did not agree with him.

"A man who goes out to live on a desert ranch

must expect to be a bachelor all his life," Geraldine ventured, "for no girl of our class would want to live in such a desolate place."

The boy looked up brightly. "Wrong again, Geraldine!" he said. "The girl I would want to marry would love it out there." Then he laughingly added: "You see, I never intend to marry until I find someone who will be as fine a little homemaker as my mother is. Mom could be a rich man's wife or a poor man's wife and shine in either position. She can make her own dresses and hats if need be and enjoy doing it, and, as for cooking, Kate can't compare with her. Of course I wouldn't expect my wife to be a drudge, but I do want her to know how to do all of the things that make home a place of solid comfort. None of these pretty, dolled-up, society girls for me!"

The lad was not looking at his listener and so he did not know that the rose in her cheeks had deepened, or that she was biting her lips angrily. Although she had no real reason for thinking so, she was convinced Jack was expressing his very poor opinion of her, Geraldine Morrison. She rose and said coldly, "It is late. Alfred and I must be going."

That night she cried for a long time, though she could not have told why, and she decided that the very next morning she would ask the Colonel to permit her to return to the city where the boys admired and understood her.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HEART OF A SNOB

THE Colonel glanced anxiously at his young guest the next morning. She had been so bright and animated for days that the good man was beginning to hope that the city girl was becoming acclimated, but again she was looking pale and disinterested. When she had finished her breakfast and had retired to her room, the Colonel called Mrs. Gray into his study and together they had a long talk about Geraldine.

"Poor little girl," the kind old lady said. "She has never known a mother's love and I would be glad to help her, but I can't reach her heart. She treats me courteously, but her attitude says as plainly as words: 'Mrs. Gray, you are only an upper servant from whom I wish no familiarity.' I have tried ever since I came to find something which would be the open sesame of this stone barrier which the little

girl has raised between us, but I am beginning to think that there is none."

"Try just once more," the Colonel said anxiously, "and then, if you do not succeed, I will comply with her father's suggestion and send her away to a boarding school if she is unhappy here."

The little old lady went directly to Geraldine's room and tapped on the door. There was no reply and so she softly entered.

The girl had thrown herself down on the window seat and her shoulders were shaken with sobs. Strangely enough in one hand she held a stocking which she had evidently been attempting to darn.

Truly touched, the kind old lady went toward her and said with infinite tenderness: "Dear, dear little girl! Won't you tell me why you are unhappy?" She sat beside Geraldine and smoothed her hair.

"Oh, why didn't my mother live?" was the sobbing reply. "She would have taught me the things that other girls know how to do, and then no one could have called me a pretty dolled-up butterfly."

Mrs. Grey realized that someone had deeply hurt Geraldine's pride, but perhaps this was the very cleft in the stone wall for which she had been seeking.

"Little girl," she said kindly, "you cannot know

how my heart has yearned through the years, first for a daughter of my own and then for a granddaughter to whom I might teach the things that would help her to become a truly womanly woman. It would mean so much to me, Geraldine; it would give me so much happiness, if you would let me just pretend that you are that little girl."

The wondering lassie sat up, her beautiful violet eyes brimming with unshed tears. There were also tears in the eyes of the old lady, and, perhaps, for the first time in her sixteen years the girl felt a rush of sympathy in her heart for someone not herself.

"You, too, are lonely, Mrs. Gray?" she asked. Then she added sorrowfully: "I guess I never really knew what I had missed until I heard the boys and girls here telling about their wonderful mothers. Father has often told me that my mother was wonderful, too. She would have taught me to sew and make my own dresses and hats and to cook, if that is what a girl should know."

The housekeeper marveled. This was not the Geraldine of yesterday. What had happened? Mrs. Gray could not know, but what she did know was that it was a moment to seize upon, and this she did.

"Geraldine," she said, "let me teach you these things."

"Oh, will you?" was the eager reply. "How long will it take me to learn, do you think? May I begin a dress today?"

Mrs. Gray laughed, and, stooping, she kissed the girl's wet cheek, then she said: "Get on your coat, dearie, and we will go into town and buy the material."

This was the beginning of happy days for these two.

A week later Geraldine stood in front of the long mirror in her sun-flooded room, gazing with shining eyes at her own graceful self, clothed, for the very first time, in a garment of her own making.

She had begged Mrs. Gray to permit her to put in every stitch so that she might truthfully say that she made it all herself. To whom she wished to say this, the little old lady could not surmise.

"Isn't it the prettiest color, Mrs. Gray?" Geraldine asked for the twentieth time as she looked at the clinging folds of soft blue cashmere.

"It is indeed, dearie," the housekeeper replied, "and it's the blue that makes your eyes look like two lovely violets."

The girl's gaze wandered to the reflection of her face and she smiled. "Daddy says that my eyes are just like Mother's. I'm so glad." Then she added happily: "It's all done, isn't it, Mrs. Gray, except a collar, and we haven't decided how to make that yet, have we? Oh, there's the telephone. I wonder who it is?"

Skipping to the little table near her bed, she lifted the receiver and called, "Good morning."

Merry's voice said: "Geraldine, we want you to come over this afternoon."

"I'll be there!" the seamstress replied, and then, whirling around, she exclaimed: "It was Merry Lee. She wants me to be at her house about three. How I wish I could wear my new dress."

"Why, so you can, dearie. I'll cut out a deep muslin collar and you can sew tiny ruffles around the edge and the dress will be complete long before that hour "

In the early afternoon, all alone, Geraldine tramped dowr the snowy road and her heart was singing. She could not understand why she felt so happy.

The girls were gathered in the cheerful library of the Lee home when Geraldine entered.

They welcomed her gladly, and when her wraps were removed Merry, in little girl fashion, exclaimed: "Oh, do look, everybody. Isn't that the sweetest new dress Geraldine has on?"

The wearer of the dress, with flushed cheeks and glowing eyes, turned around that the girls might all examine her gown, and then, unable longer to keep her wonderful secret, she exclaimed: "You'll never believe it, but it's honestly true. I made every stitch of this dress myself. Of course, Mrs. Gray cut it out and showed me how, but truly I made it, and I never enjoyed doing anything more in my whole life."

Then it was that Geraldine chanced to glance at the open door of the music room, and the rose in her cheeks deepened, for Jack, with book in hand, was standing there. Luckily he had completely forgotten the conversation of the week before and so he did not even dream that his theories had been the incentive for Geraldine's experiments in dressmaking.

"Jack," his sister called, "isn't this a pretty dress? Geraldine made it all herself."

"It surely is!" the lad replied as he entered the room. "It's the color I like best." Then, as Merry and Doris served hot chocolate and cookies, the lad

sat on the window seat beside Geraldine and talked about his favorite subject, cattle-raising in Arizona. An hour later, when the girls were about to depart, he reappeared to announce that he would take them all home in his father's big sleigh if they did not mind being crowded. It was with a happy heart that Geraldine noticed that one by one Jack left the town girls at their homes, and then went round the longest way to the Wainright place.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIRST DAY IN A NEW SCHOOL

IT HAD been decided between Mr. Morrison and the Colonel, who had been corresponding about the matter, not to start Geraldine in the Sunnyside Seminary until she appeared to be quite contented to stay in the village. But on the Monday morning following the making of her dress, Geraldine herself appeared in the breakfast room unusually early and asked her "uncle-colonel" if he would not take her out to the seminary and introduce her to Miss Demorest. How the old gentleman's face brightened as he asked: "And so you are really content to stay and be the sunshine of my home?"

Impulsively the girl kissed his cheek. "I'm glad you *want* me," she said sincerely, "and I'll *try* to be sunny." Then, as Mrs. Gray had entered the room with a cheery good morning, the Colonel shared the good news. There was a mistiness in the grey eyes

of the little old lady and a song of thanksgiving in her heart. Geraldine, to prove to them that *her* heart was changed, went over and kissed Mrs. Gray also as she said: "My dear little Make-believe Grandmother is helping me to see things in a different light, more as I would have seen them if Mother had lived."

Then into the room came Alfred, and the good news was told to him. "That's great!" he exclaimed. "Dad will be so pleased. He certainly has a soft spot in his big heart for this little old town. Say, Mrs. Gray, do you mind if I eat in a rush? I'm afraid I'll be late for the students' special if I don't hurry."

Alfred and Jack went every morning to the "Prep" school in Dorchester.

During the sleigh ride to the seminary Geraldine chatted happily about how surprised the girls would be to see her there. She had purposely timed their going, when classes would be occupied, that she might surprise them at the recess of which they had told her.

And that is just what happened. After making arrangements with Miss Demorest for his ward to complete the winter term at the seminary, the

Colonel departed, promising to return at the closing hour, but Geraldine said that she would like to walk to town with the other girls and that she would wait at Merry Lee's house until Jack and Alfred returned from Dorchester. Then she and her brother could return together.

The Colonel noticed a slight flushing of her pretty face as she made the suggestion, and he wondered about it as he drove home through the crisp, sunlit morning.

After planning with Miss Demorest about the classes she would enter, Geraldine was told that she might wait in the library, where a cheerful fire was burning in the hearth, and that, after the mid-morning recreation, she might accompany her friends to Miss Preen's English class.

As Geraldine sat in the big comfortable chair in front of the fire, she had time to think how very different her stay in Sunnyside was turning out from what she had expected. How she had dreaded it, and how selfish and stubborn she had been! It was a wonder that the Colonel had even *wanted* her to stay; and how could that dear Mrs. Gray be so nice to her when she had snubbed her so rudely? Even the girls had been generous to overlook her snob-

bishness when they came to call upon her. She actually laughed aloud when she thought of the prank they had played upon her. Then she curled up in the chair and tried to hide, for the gong was announcing recess. A moment later merry laughter was heard as doors up and down the long corridor opened and the day pupils and boarding pupils emerged from their classes. Geraldine was wondering where her group of friends would go. She had hoped they would flock to the library, nor was she disappointed. Although she could not see them, she knew their voices. Merry was saying, "Girls, come in the library a minute. I have some news for you."

"Is it secret?" Bertha asked.

"I'll say it is—that is, just at first; after a time we'll tell it to Geraldine. Are we all here? Close the door, will you; nobody will notice."

"No, we're *not* all here. Gertrude isn't. Where *can* she be? Why didn't she come to school today?" Rose wondered.

"That's why I have called this special meeting," Merry explained. "Gertrude has gone to Dorchester to spend the winter. It was very sudden; she didn't have time even to call you all up to say good-bye. Her mother's sister was taken very ill last night

and they sent for Gertrude to take care of the children. Her aunt thinks everything of Trudie, and as she has to go to the hospital for an operation, she said she just couldn't go contentedly unless Gertrude was there to look after her two babies. It will be spring before she can return."

"Oh, I say, that *is* too bad! She'll miss all the fun we've planned for this winter," Bertha said. "But you have more to tell, Merry. What is it?"

"Yes, I have," their president confessed. "Gertrude suggested that, since we need seven girls in our secret society, she would like us to invite——"

There was a sudden rustling noise. "Hark! There's someone in this room," Peggy announced.

The girl in hiding sprang up. "I'm terribly sorry, girls," she said. "I didn't want to eavesdrop. I was crouching down so that I could leap out and surprise you when you came over by the fire, as I supposed of course you would."

With a glad cry of surprise her friends surrounded Geraldine, asking a dozen questions at once. How did she happen to be there? Was she going to stay?

And when she had answered them all satisfac-

torily, Merry announced: "This is like a play. Characters enter just when they're needed."

Geraldine's face was beaming. "O, I am *so* glad, if I am *wanted* even," she told them. "I can't understand, though, how I can be *needed.*"

"We'll have to tell you later," the president announced. "The ten-minute recess is over. Hear that cruel gong! Now, Gerry, what class are you to start in?"

"Miss Demorest said that if I would accompany Merry Lee everywhere that she went, I couldn't go wrong."

"Oh, goodie-good!" Betty Byrd exclaimed. "That means we are all in Miss Preen's English class."

"Shh! Come on!" Rose called to them from the open doorway.

Merry introduced the new pupil to the angular Miss Preen and Geraldine thought she never had seen a thinner person or one with sharper eyes. She felt sure that she would heartily dislike the English teacher, but what did *that* matter as long as she was in the class with all of her friends.

Before the hour was over Geraldine had, at least, to acknowledge to herself that Miss Preen knew how to teach and that she made the subject very

interesting. After all, what more did one require in a teacher?

From there they went to a song service conducted in the basement recreation hall by Professor Lowsley, whose hair, soft, grey and wavy, rested on his shoulders. His near-sighted eyes were gentle and light blue, and his manner one of infinite patience. For half an hour the forty girls in the school practiced vocal scales all together, then sang songs, some old and some new, until the gong announced for them a change of activities. Geraldine was interested to know what was to happen next.

"We go to lunch now," Merry informed her. "After we've washed up in yonder lavatory."

The dining-rooms were also in the basement, beyond the recreation hall, and Geraldine was delighted to find that she was to occupy Gertrude's place at a table with her six friends and one teacher, a Miss Adelaine Brockett, young, who had charge of the gym, understanding theatricals and games. In reality she was Miss Demorest's assistant and often had entire charge of the seminary during the principal's absences. The girls seemed to adore Miss Brockett, but of course Merry could not talk about their club plans with anyone else present.

"Isn't it great that we day pupils are allowed to have lunch here these wintry days? It's a long mile to the middle of town and that poky old street car never could get us home and back in time for classes," Peg said to Geraldine, who agreed that it was a jolly plan.

"You missed math," Rose informed her. "We have that torturous subject first thing in the morning."

Then the afternoon classes began: History, General Sciences, Drawing, and French. But at last three o'clock arrived and the girls started to walk to town. "I'm so glad you didn't have your 'uncle-colonel' call for you," Merry informed Geraldine, who was walking at her side, the other girls following two by two, that being as wide as the walk had been shoveled in that suburban part of town. They passed fine old homes set far back on wide snow-covered grounds among bare old trees. "We are having a most important club meeting at my house today, and——"

Geraldine stood still, exclaiming with sincere disappointment: "Then I can't stop there and wait for Alfred as I told my uncle-colonel that I would."

"Why not?" Merry asked; then before her com-

panion could reply, she exclaimed: "Oh, I understand now! You think we wouldn't want to discuss club business with you there. You're wrong, Gerry, my dear! We *especially do* want you there. Now, don't ask me any questions. This is a secret club and it wouldn't do for me to tell you a thing about it until the meeting is called." And with that explanation the curious Geraldine had to be content.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MYSTERY TO SOLVE

"MEETING is called to order!" Merry turned to beckon the girl, who, feeling rather like an intruder, had seated herself some distance from the others. "Gerry, come over and sit in Jack's favorite easy chair," their hostess said. "Then you'll be in the circle with the rest of us."

Geraldine was conscious of the slight flush which she always felt in her cheeks when Jack's name was mentioned, but she gladly joined the others, sinking into the luxurious depths of a softly upholstered cosy-comfort chair.

"You'll have to say interesting things to keep me awake," she laughingly warned them as she snuggled down in it.

"Don't worry about *this* meeting not being interesting. It's going to be a thriller," the president announced. Whereupon the members all sat up

ready to ask a chorus of questions, but Merry pounded on the table before her with her improvised gavel, an ornamented paper-cutter, as she said imperatively: "Silence, if you please! We will now have the roll call. Sleuth Rose, are you present?"

A laughing response: "I am!"

And so on until each had been called. Geraldine was very much awake. "Madame President," she burst in, "if I'm not too much out of order, will you please tell me *why* you call these pretty maidens by such a terrible name? Sleuths! Ohoo!" she shuddered. "I thought sleuths were long, lank, stealthy creatures who steel around slums and underworld places trying to find criminals."

"Well, perhaps some sleuths do," Merry acknowledged, "but *we* aren't quite that desperate."

Then Peg put in: "O, I say, Merry, have a heart; don't mystify Gerry any longer. Begin at the beginning and tell her what our club has stood for in the past, and what it will accomplish in the future."

"How can I reveal what nobody knows?" their president inquired. However, she turned to Geraldine and told how the seven girls who always walked back and forth to school together had formed a clique, which at first they had named Sunnyside Club

with "Spread Sunshine" for a motto. "Our Saint Gertrude's suggestion, you may be sure," Rose interjected.

"Well, we *did* do a great deal to make the children up in the orphanage happy," Betty Byrd championed as though feeling that the absent member was in some way being maligned.

Bertha Angel agreed with her emphatically: "Of course we did, little one, and we intend to keep it up. Being sleuths won't in any way keep us from doing good deeds."

"But what is there to be sleuthing about in this sleepy little town of Sunnyside?" Geraldine wanted to know. "And why do you want to do it if there is?"

"O, we don't really," Rose told her. "It's sort of like taking a dare. The boys have a club which they call 'C. D. C.,' and they're terribly secret about it. They have a mysterious meeting-place, and since we girls aren't allowed to roam about nights unless our brothers are along to protect us, we never can find out where they meet. We sort of thought it might be in the old Walsley ruin on the East Lake Road. That's why we asked them to take us there Saturday after that robbery. We thought if that

was their secret meeting-place, they would have it fitted up like a clubroom some way, and then of course they wouldn't want us to visit it. But when they said 'sure thing,' they'd take us if we wanted to go, why then we were convinced that's *not* where they hold their secret meetings."

Peggy interrupted with: "Maybe *you* were convinced, old dear, but I was *not*. You say we can't go up the East Lake Road at night when the boys hold their meetings. Of course we can't, but what's to hinder us from going up there alone some time in the daylight. If that old man who killed himself haunts the place at all, it wouldn't be while the sun is shining."

"Ugh!" Gerry said with a shudder. "Now I believe you *are* sleuths. Wanting to visit a haunted house! But tell me, what kind of a club is the 'C. D. C.' "

"It's a detective club, and we, that is, Merry, figured out, by putting two and two together, that it means 'Conan Doyle Club.' Jack shut her in a closet one day, and before she could let him know she was there, she heard enough to know that he and his friends have tried to find some mystery to solve in Sunnyside, and have decided that there isn't one,

and so they take turns making up mysteries. They read them at these secret meetings and let the others try to figure out clues."

"Is that why you girls started to be sleuths?" Gerry wanted to know.

Bertha nodded. "Merry heard one of the boys say that an uncle of his in New York, who is a lawyer, had written about a famous girl detective, and the others scoffed at the very idea. They said they couldn't imagine *girls* ever solving a mystery, not if they were all like girls in Sunnyside. So, you see, *that* was sort of a dare, and we made up our mind we would *find* a mystery and solve it, and then crow about it; but the joke is, we haven't found a mystery!"

Merry continued with: "Peggy and Doris were a committee of two to find one, and they were to make their report last Saturday, but——"

"But nothing," Peg interrupted, "you know we were so busy planning that impromptu skating party out at the Drexel Lodge we didn't have time to call a meeting."

"Well, if we had called one," the president persisted, "you girls wouldn't have had a mystery to present."

"Wouldn't we, though?" Peg's eyes fairly glistened. "Doris, *now* is the psychological moment, as Miss Preen would say, for springing our find."

The girls, except Geraldine, gasped. She was yet too mystified to realize the importance of the announcement. They watched Doris, who unstrapped her school books and drew from her history a clipping from a newspaper. "This is from the Dorchester *Chronicle*," she announced, "and it certainly sounds mysterious to Peg and me." She looked around at them, deliberately, tantalizing.

"Oh, for goodness sakes, do hurry and read it," Bertha Angel urged.

"Doris, you read it. You can do it full justice." Doris passed it over to her fellow-committeeman, who pretended to study it leisurely.

"Peg, if you don't hurry and tell us, we'll mob you." Bertha stood up and seized a pillow from the window seat, holding it threateningly. "Be calm, Sister Sleuth," Peg said. Then she held the small scrap of paper close to a window as the short afternoon was drawing to a close. "It is headed, 'Information wanted.' A man owning a cattle ranch in Arizona has written the *Chronicle* asking that the following letter be given publicity:

" 'Dear Sirs:

" 'My young and pretty sister, Myra, was sent East to be educated. Our parents wanted to get her away from a ne'er-do-well gambler she had met in Douglas. He followed her East and married her. We never heard from her again, but believe she settled in some small community near Dorchester. I am running the ranch, but half of it belongs to Myra, and, as I believe if she is living she must be in need, I want to find her.

" '(Signed) CALEB K. CORNWALL.' "

Peg looked up triumphantly. "There! What do you think of *that* for a mystery?"

Merry acknowledged that it *was* a mystery, of course, but why think the pretty young Myra settled in Sunnyside? "There are at least six small villages within a radius of forty miles," she reminded them.

"Oh, of course, maybe it isn't our town, *but,* also, *maybe* it is." Peg was not going to let them lose sight of whatever value there was in the "find" she and Doris had made.

"Oh, how provoking, here come Jack and Alfred! Now we'll have to adjourn just when the meeting is most interesting. Ssh! Don't let them hear us talk-

ing about it. Let's meet here again tomorrow afternoon," Merry said hurriedly.

"But you won't want *me* to come, will you?" Geraldine asked, very much hoping that they would say that they *did* want her. Nor was she disappointed.

"Why, of course we do, Gerry." Then Merry exclaimed self-rebukingly: "How *stupid* of me! I started to tell in school that Gertrude wanted us to invite *you* to take her place in the 'S. S. C.' for the rest of the winter, while she is away, but I remember now, the gong rang, then I forgot and sort of thought I *had* told you."

Then Peg asked: "You'd like to be Sleuth Gerry, wouldn't you?"

How the older girl's eyes were glowing! "I'd like it more than anything that has ever happened in my life," she answered them. Then Merry put a finger on her lips and nodded toward the hall door. Doris, taking the hint, exclaimed: "And those dear little orphans will be simply delighted to have a Valentine party. We can fix things up so prettily. I do think——"

The door had opened and Jack sang out: "Our Sunnyside Spreaders, I observe, are holding one of

their most commendable meetings. Unlike the 'C. D. C.'s,' they have no secrets to hide." He winked at Alfred, who laughed so understandingly that the observers were led to believe that Geraldine's brother had also been admitted to the boys' club. Nor were they wrong.

"How did you like your first day in our country school?" Jack asked Gerry as he crossed to where she sat by the fire and stooped over the blaze to warm his hands.

"O, I loved it!" that maiden frankly confessed; then acknowledged, "It's really nicer in lots of ways than the Dorchester Seminary." Then she rose. "We'd better be going, Brother," she began when the telephone whirred. Merry turned from it to say that the Colonel was in town and would call for them in five minutes.

"Well, we'll be over tomorrow to plan that Valentine party for the orphans," Peg called as the girls trooped away. Then the Colonel's sleigh bells were heard coming up the drive. Just before she left, Geraldine drew Merry to one side to say in a low voice: "Tell the girls how *very* grateful I am to them for having taken me in after I had been so unforgivably horrid."

Merry gave her friend's hand a loving squeeze. "I think *we* are the ones to ask forgiveness for the prank we played," she said; then impulsively added: "Let's be *sister-friends,* shall we?"

Gerry felt the tell-tale flush in her cheeks, but Alfred was calling, "Do hurry, Sister. This isn't good-bye forever." And so laughingly they parted.

CHAPTER XIX.

SEARCHING FOR CLUES

THE next afternoon the girls found Bob waiting near the seminary with the delivery sleigh. Geraldine, for half a moment, was amazed to hear the squeels of delight uttered by her companions as they swarmed up into the straw-covered box part of the cutter.

"This is great!" Merry exclaimed. "How did you happen to do it, Bobbie dear?"

The boy nodded toward his sister, who replied for him: "Bob said he would be returning from Dorchester about this hour, and I asked him to pick us up, like an angel child, so that we could have a longer meeting. It gets dark so early and it takes a full half hour to walk the mile to Merry's."

"Sort of a ruddy-looking angel child," Rose, at the boy's side, teased him. The round, pleasant face of the boy was always ruddy, but today it was un-

usually so, partly because of the long drive he had had in the frosty air and partly because of his pleasure at having Rose with him.

Down the wide, snow-covered road they sped, and Geraldine could not but compare this ride with those that were being taken by the pupils of the Dorchester Seminary, where most fashionable turnouts each day awaited the closing hours. But she had to honestly confess that she was having much more fun than she ever had before. Merry smiled across at her and Gerry smiled back, happily recalling the whispered request of the evening before: "Let us be sister-friends, shall we?"

"All out for Merry-dale!" Bob was soon calling as he drew rein in front of the Lee house. Then to the girl at his side he said in a low voice, "I'll be through at the store at five. May I drive you home?"

"Yes, indeed, and stay to supper," Rose said brightly, adding as an afterthought: "Gerry and Alfred can go with us, can't they? Then the Colonel won't have to come after them."

"Sure thing," the good-natured boy replied. "So long!"

"There now," Merry announced when they were

sitting about the fire five minutes later, "we have a good two hours, if nobody interrupts us, and we ought to be able to delve deeply into our mystery. Peg, will you or Doris review the facts in the case?"

"Shouldn't we call them clues?" Bertha inquired.

"O, I don't know. I haven't been a sleuth long enough to be sure about anything," the president smilingly admitted. Then Doris reminded them that it was a ranchman in Arizona named Caleb K. Cornwall who was searching for a young and pretty sister named Myra, who had married a ne'er-do-well and supposedly had settled in some small community near Dorchester, in New York State.

"Well, Sleuth Bertha, you look wise. What would *you* suggest that we do first?" Merry had turned toward the tall maiden, whose expression was habitually serious and thoughtful.

"I was just wondering if there is any woman in town named Myra. Our mothers might know, for I suppose this lost person is about their age."

"How come?" Peg asked. "There is no mention of age in the letter. Merely that she was a young and pretty girl when she was sent East to school."

"That might have been ten years ago or twenty, thirty, or any number," Rose reminded them.

"True enough," Merry conceded. "Wait a moment. Mother is in her sewing-room, I think. I'll ask her if she ever heard of a woman in Sunnyside named Myra."

"Won't she wonder at your asking?" Peg was fearful lest their secret would be divulged.

"No, indeed," Merry shook her head. "Mums isn't even remotely curious about what our club is doing. She knows we are holding a meeting, but that's all."

In less than ten minutes she was back again with two names written on a magazine cover. "I don't think these will help us much," she informed the girls, whose alert attitudes proved their eager interest." One is Myra Comely. She lives below the tracks and takes in washing. Mother thinks she may be about forty. The other is Myra Ingersol. She lives out on the old Dorchester road. Mother doesn't just know where, but it's a farm that makes a specialty of chickens and eggs. The woman makes jelly and sells it, too. That's really all Mother knows about her. The name is on each jar, Mums says. 'Myra Ingersol's Jams,' like that. We get them from the grocery. You ought to know about them, Bertha."

"I do," that maiden replied, "and, what's more, I know the woman. I've been in the store when she brought in her wares. I've been trying to picture her, Merry, while you were talking, as having ever been young and pretty, but I just can't. She is a big-boned, awkward person with red-grey hair drawn back as though it had a weight on it, and sharp blue eyes." The girl shook her head. "I'm convinced she is *not* the Myra Mr. Cornwall wants to find."

"How old is the jam person?" Gerry contributed her first inquiry.

"Oh, close to sixty, perhaps, although she may be younger. She's had a hard life, I judge."

"We might call them up on the telephone and ask them if they ever lived in Arizona," Betty Byrd naively suggested. How the others laughed. "Little one," Bertha remonstrated, "don't you know that if they ran away from Arizona and are in hiding, so to speak, they would, of course, refuse to tell that it had once been their home. I mean in answer to such an abrupt question as would have to be asked over the 'phone. My suggestion is that we make some legitimate excuse for calling at the homes of the two

Myras and finding, if we can, some clues without arousing their suspicion."

"Hats off to Sleuth Bertha!" Peg sang out. "When and how shall we make the first call?"

Doris leaped up in her eagerness. "If one of the Myras is a washwoman, let's drive over there tomorrow with the Drexel weekly laundry. Mother said yesterday that the Palace New Method injures the clothes and she wants to find someone to do it by hand."

"Say, Boy, but we're in luck!" the slangy member exulted.

"And as for the other Myra," Rose said, "we might chip together and buy a chicken or two, and that would give us an excuse to visit *her* farm."

"Bravo! Keen idea! Hurray for our Rosebud!" were the exclamations which proved that the suggestion met with general approval.

"But what would we do with two chickens?" round-eyed, the youngest member inquired.

"Eat 'em, little one," Peg began.

"Not till they're cooked, I hope," Gerry laughingly put in.

"Say, fellow-sleuths, I have a peachy idea," Peg announced. "Let's get up a Valentine dinner and

invite the boys. Saturday's the fourteenth, and we can make quite a spread of it and kill two birds with one stone, so to speak."

"Two hens, do you mean?" Rose inquired. A sofa pillow was hurled at her. "You need submerging," Doris told her.

"How about that Valentine party for the orphans?" Merry asked slyly. "It seems to me one was suggested last night just as the boys came home."

"Sure thing, we'll have one, but that will be different. Now this Valentine party——"

Peg could say no more, for the door had opened and two laughing boys stood there. Merry rose and confronted her brother. "Jack Lee, how long have you been out there in the hall listening to our club doings?"

"Not a fraction of a second, have we, Alf?" he turned to his companion for corroboration. "All I heard is just what you were saying last night, that you are going to give a party for the orphans on Valentine's day."

The girls looked still unconvinced, and so Alfred leaped into the breach with, "Here's proof sufficient, I should think." He held out his coat sleeve, on

which there were frosty snow stars as yet unmelted. "If we'd been long in the house, they would be dew-drops. Is it not so?"

"Verily." Peg seemed relieved, as did the others, but when the boys had gone into Jack's study, which adjoined the library, the girls were puzzled to hear laughter that the boys were evidently trying to muffle. Merry put a warning finger on her lips, which meant that they would postpone further discussion until another day.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SLEUTHS SLEUTHING

"ISN'T it keen that we have this whole Friday afternoon off?" Peg pirouetted about on the snowy road in front of the girls. "Now we can carry out all of our plans before dark, if——" She hesitated and Doris continued with: " 'If'—the biggest word in the language. If we can beg, borrow or hire a cutter large enough to take us all out the East Lake Road. Bertha, you'll have to drive, being our expert horsewoman."

The girls had lunched at the school and were trooping townwards, having been excused for the afternoon, as none of them happened to be in a play which was to be rehearsed from two to four.

"Here's another if," Rose put in. "If the snow wasn't so deep on the Lake Road, we might all pile in my runabout. I can drive *it* as skillfully as Bertha can drive her father's horses."

"But there *is* snow on the roads as soon as you leave town," Geraldine contributed. "The snow plough hasn't even reached as far as the Wainright home."

"Well, let's go to the Angel grocery first and see if a delivery sleigh can be borrowed, and if not, why then maybe I can inveigle my papa-dear to loan me one of his," Peg suggested.

This plan was followed, and fifteen minutes later the girls were seated on the bottom of a box sleigh with Bertha and Merry up on the driver's seat. "Dad needs this fashionable turnout by five o'clock," Bertha said as she urged the big dapple-grey horse to its briskest trot. "Now, first we are to stop at the Drexels and get the bundle of laundry, I believe." The driver glanced over her shoulder and Doris nodded in the affirmative. "It's all done up and waiting."

Another fifteen minutes and Dapple, having crossed the tracks, turned into a narrow side street where the houses were small, with many evidences of poverty. Merry had found the address in the telephone book, and when the right number was reached, Dapple was brought to a standstill.

"This house looks real neat," Betty Byrd com-

mented. "Clean white curtains at the windows and a big backyard, and a lot of washing hung out."

Doris patted their youngest as she approved: "Observation is surely an excellent trait for a sleuth to develop."

"Won't our victim think it queer that it takes seven girls to deliver one bundle of wash?" Geraldine paused to inquire as they trooped through the gate.

"What care we?" Merry was already up on the step and turned to knock on the door, when it was opened by a girl of about their own age.

"How do you do, Miss Angel," she addressed Bertha, whom she knew by sight. "Won't you all come in?"

They entered a small but spotlessly clean sitting-room and Doris asked, "Is Mrs. Myra Comely here?"

"No, Mother isn't here just now. Won't you be seated?"

Doris hesitated. "I—er—wanted to ask her a few questions about—well, about her methods of laundering."

The girl had a pleasant face and she seemed not

at all abashed to have so many of the town's "aristocracy" calling upon her at once.

"Mother is careful to use nothing that could harm the clothes, if that is what you mean," she informed them. "I expect her home directly, if you care to wait." Then, seeing that there were not chairs enough, she excused herself and brought two from the kitchen and placed them for Doris and Bertha.

When they were all seated, Merry, with a meaning glance at her fellow-sleuths which seemed to say, "We *may* be able to get the information we need from the daughter," glanced out of the window as she said idly, "We're having a pleasant winter, aren't we?"

"Yes, there's lots more snow in your town, though, than where we came from." Blue eyes and brown flashed exulting glances at one another.

"Then Sunnyside has not been your home for long?" Merry inquired.

The girl shook her head. "No, we lived in Florida for years, but I was born in Ireland. That was father's home, but Mother came from—" She hesitated and glanced about apologetically. Every eye was upon her, every ear listening, but of their eager interest the girl could not guess. "I chatter on about

my folks as though you'd care to hear where we all came from," she said.

"O, we do care an awful lot," Betty Byrd assured her, then, catching a reproving glance from Doris, their youngest wilted and the older girl said: "I think it's always interesting to hear where people came from, don't you, Miss——"

"My name is Myra Comely, just as my mother's is." Then she added brightly: "Here she is now." The door opened and a pleasant-faced woman of about forty entered and removed a shawl which she had worn over her head.

"Howdy do," she said with a smile which included them all.

Doris stepped forward and explained that her mother wished to have her laundry done by hand, and so they had brought it to her. Mrs. Comely thanked her and told about her methods and prices. After that there was nothing for the girls to do but rise, preparing to go. Merry, in a last desperate effort to obtain the information they desired, turned at the door to say, "Your daughter tells us that you are from Ireland. I have always been so interested in that country and hope to visit there some day."

The woman smiled. "I liked Ireland," she said.

"I was about your age or a little older when I left the States as a bride for that far-away island."

It was cold out and the door was open. What *could* the girls do to obtain the needed information? Peg plunged in with, "Which state did you come from, Mrs. Comely?" The girls gasped, but, if the woman thought it a strange question, she made no sign of it. "I was born in a little village on the other side of Dorchester. Your laundry will be delivered on Tuesday, Miss Drexel."

As the girls were driving away, Peg said: "I suppose it was awful of me to come right out with that question, but we just had to know."

"O, probably sleuths have to ask questions sometimes, although it's more clever to get information in a round-about way," Doris said; then asked: "Bertha, how did Myra Comely happen to know *your* name?"

"She trades at our store," was the reply. "Everyone in town, sooner or later, sees me in there helping Dad. I post his books for him."

Geraldine felt somewhat shocked. To think that *she* was associating with a girl who sometimes worked in a grocery. The snob in her was not

entirely dead, she feared. But she *must* kill it! How Jack would scorn her if he knew her thoughts.

They were all in the sleigh and the big horse, Dapple, glad to be again on the move, for the air was snappily cold even though the sun was shining, started toward the Lake Road at his merriest pace. Snowballs flew back at the laughing girls from his heels.

"It's three now!" Bertha glanced at her wrist watch. "Shall we stop at the old ruin before or after we visit the Ingersol farm?"

The opinions being divided, as was their usual custom they permitted the president to decide, and she said wisely that she thought it more important to visit the farm than it was the ruin, and so they would better go there first.

They were glad when they passed the Inn that Mr. Wiggin or his wife were not in evidence. Mr. Wiggin was so garrulous that, if he saw any of the boys in town, he would ask what the girls had been doing out that way alone.

Betty Byrd held fast to Doris as they turned into the side wood road which was a shortcut to the old Dorchester highway.

"Skeered, little one?" the older girl smiled down at her.

"Well, sort of," the younger girl confessed. "This is where that old man was robbed, and——"

"O, fudge," Peg sang out. "Forget it! That was the first holdup that ever occurred around here, and probably will be the last."

"Where is the Welsley farm?" Geraldine inquired after a time.

"Beyond that tall pine-tree hedge," Merry indicated with a wave of her fur-lined glove. "You'll see the crumbling cupulo in a second."

The girls gazed intently at the little they could see of the house as they passed the long high hedge.

"I don't believe the boys come way out here for their meetings," Bertha, the sensible, remarked when they had turned into the old Dorchester road.

"In fact, I don't believe they could, much of the time, because of the snow drifts. I think if we want to find where their clubrooms are, we'll have to look somewhere nearer home."

A moment later Peg called: "There it is! See the name on that signboard, 'The Ingersol Chicken Farm,' and under it, 'Jams and jellies a specialty.' "

They turned in at a wide gate in the picket fence

and found themselves in a large dooryard in front of a substantially built white farmhouse. In the back was an orchard and long rows of berry bushes and at the side were many chicken runs wired in.

A tall, angular woman, wearing a man's coat and hat, appeared from a barn carrying a basket of eggs. The girls climbed from the sleigh and walked toward her. "Peg, suppose you do the talking this time," Merry suggested, "but use diplomacy. Don't plunge right in."

"No, *thanks!*" That maid shook her head vehemently. "It's up to you, Merry."

And so their president advanced with her friendliest smile. "Mrs. Ingersol?"

The woman, without a visible change of features, acknowledged that to be her name, and so Merry said: "We would like to buy a couple of chickens of about two or three pounds each." This surely sounded innocent enough. The woman was most business-like. To the surprise of the girls, she took from her coat pocket a whistle and blew upon it a shrill blast. Instantly, or almost so, a long, lank youth appeared out of a nearby chicken yard and called, "What yo' want, Ma?"

"Two threes fixed," was the terse reply. Then to the girls: "Come along in and get yerselves warm. Beastly cold winter we've been havin', tho' it's let up a spell."

The girls followed the woman into a large, clean kitchen. A fire snapped and crackled in the big wood stove. There was a long wood box near it which served as a window seat, and four of the girls ranged along on it, the others sat on white pine chairs, stiff and just alike.

The woman eyed them with an expression which revealed neither interest nor curiosity as to who they were. The girls found it harder to ask questions of this adamant sort of a creature than they had of Myra Comely. But she it was who broke the ice by asking, "Do you all live in Sunnyside?"

Merry nodded, smiling her brightest. "Yes, we're all from town." Then she hurried to take advantage of the opening. "Have you been here long, Mrs. Ingersol?"

"Yep, born clost to here. Never been out'n the state in my life. Hep, my son, he-uns was born here and ain't so much as been out o' the *county*. Don't reckon he's like to, as he's set on marryin' a gal down the road a piece."

The woman turned abruptly and went through a door. The girls looked at each other tragically. "That didn't take long, but, alas and alak for us, no clues!"

Doris put a finger on her lips and nodded toward the door, which was again opening. The woman reappeared, divested of her masculine outer garments. She had on a dull red flannel dress, severely plain, and a white apron, the sort farmer's wives reserve for company wear. She was carrying a dish of cookies and an open jar of jam. She actually smiled as she placed them on the spotless white wood table. "Help yerselves," she said hospitably. "Here's a knife to spread on the jam with. An' there's a tin dipper over by the sink if yo' need water to help wash 'em down."

When they were again in the sleigh, and a safe distance from the house, the girls laughed merrily. "Mrs. Ingersol's kernel is sweeter than her husk," Bertha remarked. Then added: "Girls, we'll have to go home on this road and leave our visit to the old ruin until some other time. It's four-thirty now."

"Well, we've got our chickens anyway," Merry said as she held the brown paper bundle aloft. "Kate

said we may have her kitchen tomorrow from two o'clock on for the rest of the day. Now let's plan what else we must get. I'll tell Jack to invite the boys to our Valentine dinner. Won't they be surprised when they think we were planning it for the orphans?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A VALENTINE PARTY

ON SATURDAY afternoon, when Geraldine was leaving Colonel Wainright's home at about one-thirty, she saw Danny O'Neil working at the summer house, where he was replacing some of the lattice work which had broken under the heavy weight of snow. Suddenly she remembered something Doris had said when they had been planning the Valentine dinner: "I wish Danny O'Neil could be invited, but he probably wouldn't come. He thinks that some of us consider him merely a servant."

The city girl could not understand *why* Doris wanted the boy, and she realized that it was *her own* attitude that was keeping him away. Then she remembered what Mrs. Gray had told her about his great loneliness for the mother who had so recently

died. Geraldine also knew what it was to be motherless. Then, once again, she felt the sweet influence of real sympathy, and, turning back, she called: "Danny O'Neil, we girls are giving a surprise Valentine party at Merry Lee's home tonight at six, and Doris particularly wants you to come with Alfred."

Then, before the amazed lad could reply, the girl turned and hurried down the walk to where her brother waited in a cutter to drive her into town. On the way she told Alfred what she had said to Danny, and she asked him to persuade him to accept since Doris so wanted him.

"Sure thing, I will!" the boy replied heartily. "He's a mighty nice chap. Lots of talent, too, I should say. I was up in his room last night for a while. He was carving book ends. I thought it mighty clever work."

Geraldine, upon reaching the Lee home, found the other girls there before her. The big, cheerful kitchen swarmed with them. They had agreed to wear white dresses with red sashes, and red ribbon butterfly bows in their hair, but their aprons were of all colors.

Merry was giving orders. "Here, Doris, you

crack these walnuts, will you? Bertha is going to make one of her famous nut cakes." Then she interrupted herself to say, "Oh, Gerry, hello! You've arrived just in time to—to—" She looked around to see what the newcomer could do.

"Send her over here to help me pare potatoes," Peg sang out. But Merry saw, by the almost startled expression in the city girl's face, that she would be more apt to cut her fingers than the humble vegetable, and so she replied: "No, Peg, that's *your* work. Gerry shall help me set the table." Then she apologized: "I'm sorry to do the pleasantest thing myself, but no one else knows where the dishes and things are."

"Oh, it's *all* pleasant," Bertha commented, "when we're all together."

"What's our Rosebud doing?" Gerry sauntered across the kitchen to the stove where their prettiest member stood stirring something in a pot. The "our" proved how completely the city girl felt that she was one of them.

"Making Valentine candy," that maiden replied. "This is a sort of a white fudge. It's ever so creamy when it's whipped. Just delicious with chopped nuts

in it. We're going to make heart shapes, then dip them in red frosting."

For an hour they all worked busily at their appointed tasks; then Merry and Gerry called the others into the dining-room to see the table.

"Oh-oo, how pretty!"

"Girls, will you look at the red ribbons running from that heart-shaped box in the middle to each place! What's the idea, Merry?"

"You'll know later," their president laughingly informed them. "That's a surprise for everybody which Jack and I planned last night."

Then Geraldine exclaimed: "Why, Merry, you have made a mistake, haven't you? There are sixteen places instead of fifteen."

"Nary a mistake," Doris replied. "We have invited that pretty Myra Comley and she has accepted." Then before the astonished Geraldine could say, "What? Invited a washwoman's daughter," Doris was hurrying on to explain how it had happened. "Myra brought our laundry home this morning, and we had quite a long visit. Merry was over at my house, and we both liked her ever so much, and when she said that she had never been to

a party, why we just invited her to ours. I hope *you* don't mind." There was a shade of anxiety in the voice of Doris as she glanced at the taller girl, whose expression was hard to read.

There was indeed a struggle going on in Geraldine's heart, but good sense won out. She slipped an arm effectionately about her friend as she said: "Anyone who is good enough for *you* to associate with is good enough for me!" The other girls had drifted back to the kitchen to resume their tasks, and these two were alone. "Doris, dear," Gerry said, "I told your friend, Danny O'Neil, I hoped he would come, and I made Alfred promise to bring him."

How the pretty face of Doris brightened. "That was mighty nice of you!" she exclaimed. "Now I *know* he will come. I telephoned him early this morning, but he seemed to think you wouldn't care to associate with him; that is, not socially."

Then an imperative voice called from the kitchen: "Say, you two ornaments in there, come on out and help with this chicken."

At six o'clock all was in readiness, and the seven girls, divested of aprons, waited the ringing of the

door bell with cheeks as rosy as their ribbons. They had the house quite to themselves, as Mrs. Angel had obligingly invited Merry's parents to dinner and Katie had been only too glad to spend the afternoon and evening with her friends below the tracks.

"Here comes somebody. Who do you suppose will arrive first?" Merry had just said when the front door burst open and Jack ushered in Myra Comely. Merry had asked her brother to bring her, but, almost before the door had closed, the bell was jingling, and all of the others arrived at once.

In the whirl of excitement that followed, with everybody welcoming everybody else, no one noticed that Danny had drawn Doris to one side and was giving her a package. "It's a valentine that I made for you. Book-ends that I carved," he said in a low voice. "Don't open it here."

Geraldine glanced in their direction just as Doris lifted sweet, brown eyes and smiled her appreciation at the boy. But before she could puzzle about the meaning of it, Jack had taken her hand and was leading her into the living-room, which was festooned with strings of red paper hearts. Jokingly he began: "Fair Queen o' Hearts, I'm the Jack o'

Hearts, won't you please tell me where you've hidden the tarts?"

What a throng of them there was as they swarmed into the brightly lighted living-room.

"Don't sit down, anybody," Merry warned. "The party-part is going to start right away. But first you have to draw for partners." Then she explained that she would pass a basket to the boys that would contain halves of valentines, and that at the same time Gerry would pass one with the other halves to the girls. "You are each to take one, and the two who have the parts of one valentine are to be partners. The girls are to stand still and the boys to do the hunting."

For ten merry minutes boys darted about matching halves of valentines. The result was rather disappointing to several of them, for Rose was *not* for Bob, and Jack drew Myra Comely, while Gerry, of all the queer tricks of Fate, was Danny O'Neil's partner; but they took it in good part, and when Merry put an appropriate song record on the victrola they all marched out to the dining-room. The girls felt quite repaid for their efforts when they heard the sincere exclamation of approval which the boys

uttered. Then Merry, as hostess-in-chief, explained that each couple was to select seats and that they should do this thoughtfully, as the ribbons had at the other ends prophecies as to their future. There were tiny bows on the ribbons for girls.

Amid much laughter from the fair ones and "wise cracks" from the boys, places were chosen, and then when they were all seated, one by one the ribbons were pulled and out of the box-heart on the middle of the table a small red paper heart was drawn, and on it, in jolly jingle, was a prophesy for the future.

As each was drawn, it was read aloud and was followed by much laughter and teasing, especially when Bob read:

"A dark brunette shall be your wife,
And she will lead you *such* a life
Of woe and worry and of strife."

"Oh, I say, Rose," Bob grinned across the table at the girl who sat opposite him, "are *you* going to let that dark brunette get me?"

"Read yours, Rosie," Merry called gaily, and so Rose read:

"A long, lank spinster you will be;
A cat your only company;
Your favorite pastime drinking tea."

"Oh, *that's* a horrid one," Their prettiest pushed it from her and pretended to frown. "I'm going to choose another place. I really wanted to sit where you are, Peg. Read yours, so I'll know what I *might* have had." Gleefully Peg complied:

"You'll marry a gay young millionaire,
You'll travel together just everywhere,
And in all your life have never a care."

"Hurray for me!" Peg sang out, but Bob put in: "Well, I'm glad Rose didn't choose *that* ribbon. A grocer doesn't often get to be a millionaire."

And so around the table they read their futures, then the dinner was served, and so excellent was every dish that had been prepared by the fair hands that Jack was led to exclaim: "Lucky will be the swains who win these cooks for their valentines through life." Then, to the actual embarrassment of one of them, he asked: "Gerry, which of these good things did *you* cook?"

But, before the city girl, who knew *nothing* whatever about cooking, could acknowledge the fact, Merry said gaily: "Gerry and I did the decking of the table this time. Some other time we'll show you what *we* can do as cooks."

Then, to her own amazement, Geraldine heard herself saying: "I'm going to give a party soon all by myself, and everyone who is here now is invited." Her glance even included Myra Comely and Danny O'Neil. Then she concluded with, "I'll let you know the date later."

Her brother was delighted to think that his sister had entered into the social life of the village with so much evident enjoyment, and that night when they reached home he took occasion to tell her how pleased he had been with the impromptu invitation. They were standing alone in the living-room in front of the fireplace where they had stood on that first day when the "milkmaids and butter-churners" had come to call. Alfred smiled as he thought of that other day which seemed so long ago, but wisely he did not remind his sister of her rudeness and snobbishness on that other occasion. Brightly she was saying, "Oh, Alfred, I'm going to write Dad tomor-

row and tell him what a wonderful time I'm having and how glad I am that he wanted us to spend the winter in the town where he was born." Indeed *some* influence, not clearly understood by Alfred, was working miraculous changes in his sister.

CHAPTER XXII.

A NEW RESOLVE

On Monday morning Geraldine awoke with a new resolve. Never again would she be put in the embarrassing position of not being able to do anything really useful when the "S. S. C." got up a dinner, and not for worlds would she have Jack Lee know that she had considered cooking menial: an accomplishment far beneath her. His ideas and ideals were very different from those she had acquired at the fashionable seminary in Dorchester.

When the girl went down to breakfast, she found that the Colonel and Alfred had gone early to town. Mrs. Gray was waiting for her, sitting in the sunny bow window reading the morning paper. "Oh, here you are, dearie." She rose briskly as she added, "I'll have to go down to the kitchen to get the things I've been keeping warm for us."

Geraldine looked surprised. "But why doesn't Sing send them up on the lift?" she asked.

Mrs. Gray, at once sober, shook her head as she said: "Poor Sing! It seems that he went to Dorchester to the Chinese quarters yesterday to see a sick friend, and while there the place was quarantined for smallpox and he will have to remain away at least two weeks."

"Oh, Mrs. Gray, whatever *shall* we do? How can you do all the housekeeping and—the cooking as well."

The old lady smiled at the girl lovingly. "Do you know, Geraldine," she began, "I sort of thought that perhaps *you* would like to help me. Now that you can make a bed the way Merry Lee taught you, if you would make the Colonel's and Alfred's——"

"Of course I can, and will!" was the almost unexpected rejoinder. "And better than that," the girl flashed a bright smile at the old lady, "I'm *glad* Sing is going to be away for two weeks, because that will give us a chance to use the kitchen all we want to, won't it, Mrs. Gray?"

"Use the kitchen, Geraldine?" The old lady could hardly believe that she had heard aright. "I thought

I once heard you say that you hoped you would never have to step inside of a kitchen."

The girl flushed, but she answered frankly: "You are right, I did! But yesterday, when I saw those girls, all of them from nice families, cooking such a very good meal, I felt sorry. Oh, more than that. I was actually ashamed when Jack Lee asked me *which* of the dishes *I* had prepared, and if someone hadn't changed the subject, I would have felt terribly humiliated to have had to confess that I couldn't cook at all."

A ray of light was penetrating the darkness for Mrs. Gray. Briskly she replied: "I shall enjoy teaching you to cook, dearie, as I would a granddaughter of my own." Then Geraldine further surprised the old lady by leading her to her seat and declaring that she would go down to the kitchen and bring up the breakfast.

While they were eating it cosily in the sun-flooded room with snow sparkling on window sill and icicle, Geraldine confided that she had impulsively invited all of the girls and boys, who had been at Merry's, to a dinner party which she had said that *she* would cook.

How Mrs. Gray laughed. "Good! Good!" she said. "I shall enjoy that. When is it to be?"

"I thought I would like to have it on Doris Drexel's birthday. That will be in about two weeks."

That very afternoon the lessons began. No one was in the secret except the Colonel, and every day he drove to the seminary to get Geraldine that she might reach home the sooner for the lesson in dinner preparing. The girls wondered, especially when they were so eager to search for more clues in their "Myra Mystery," as Peg called it.

"What *are* you up to?" Doris asked her at last. "*Why* do you rush home every day after school?"

"I believe she has a mystery of her own," Betty Byrd teased.

Geraldine flashed a merry glance in the speaker's direction. "Righto! I have," she confessed. "However, I am going to reveal it to you all at our next meeting of the 'S. S. C.' Where is it to be?"

"At Bertha's again. That is the most central place," Merry told her. "We're all going to try to unearth something which will help solve the 'Myra Mystery.' "

* * * * * * *

When the girls met on the following Saturday afternoon, it was quite evident that at least two of them could hardly wait for the formalities to be over before they could reveal something of interest. The president, being aware of this, said as soon as Sleuth Bertha had read the minutes of the last meeting: "Geraldine and Doris look as though they would burst if they didn't tell us something. Have you both unearthed clues in the Myra Mystery?"

But Gerry shook her head. "Nary a clue!" she confessed. "My news item is far less interesting than that."

Doris, on the edge of her chair, was waiting to speak, and when the president nodded in her direction, she exclaimed: "Girls, Danny O'Neil's mother's first name began with M. And wouldn't it be wonderful if *she* should have been that Myra Cornwall? Then Danny would own *her* share of the ranch. Of course he wouldn't have to go out there to live, but he could have the money it brings in for his art education."

The girls, gazing at the flushed, eager face, wondered why Doris was so greatly interested in the boy, but Bertha, the practical, asked: "Why should you think that the initial M. would mean Myra?

There are ever so many Christian names beginning with that letter."

"Oh, of course, I'm just grasping at a straw. I only learned about it this morning. Mother had me go over a box of old receipts and throw out many of them, and I found one from Danny's mother signed merely 'M. O.'Neil.' "

"That would be splendid!" Merry commented. "I *do* wish we could find that Myra, especially if she is someone in need, and then we would be spreading sunshine as well as having a mystery club."

"I'm going to see Danny tonight," Doris told them. "Mother was so interested in—in some carving that he did that she wants to meet him, and so she had me invite him to supper."

"You call us up as soon as you find out. We'll be wild to know," Merry said; then turned toward Geraldine: "Now, may we hear *your* news item?"

The city girl beamed on them. "I invited you all to a dinner party, you remember, and told you that later I would let you know the date."

"Oh, goodie!" Betty Byrd clapped her hands. "I adore parties. When is it to be?"

Geraldine told them, and Doris said: "My birthday! I certainly appreciate that." What Gerry did

not tell them was that *she* was to cook every bit of it. She had the menu all planned, except the dessert, and she wanted that very afternoon to find out what Jack Lee liked best. To achieve this she asked: "What do most boys like for dessert?" She looked at Bertha and then at Rose, but just as she had hoped, Merry was one of the first to reply: "Jack likes whipped-cream cake with banana filling best." This information was rapidly followed with other suggestions which Geraldine scarcely heard.

The only dessert that she *cared* to remember was the one that Jack liked, and she could hardly wait for the Colonel to call for her that she might go home and practice making one for the family's Sunday dinner.

That night every member of the "S. S. C." received a telephone call, and the voice of Sleuth Doris regretfully told them that Danny's mother's name was Martha O'Neil, and so the mystery was no nearer a solution than it had been.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PROUD COOK

ON THE day of the party Geraldine was up early and at once donned a pretty blue bungalow apron. Then followed merry hours, each one filled with preparations for the dinner. Alfred offered to help stone dates and crack walnuts, while Danny O'Neil was sent on frequent trips to the village.

At five o'clock, with the help of both boys, the dining-room was prettily decorated; then Geraldine went to put on the dress she had made. Later, with Alfred, she stood near the fireplace waiting the coming of the guests.

They arrived in a procession of sleighs with ringing of bells and tooting of horns.

When Geraldine threw open the door, planning to say "Happy Birthday, Doris!" she was met by a laughing throng of young people, but Doris was not among them.

"Why, where is our guest of honor?" the amazed hostess exclaimed as the others trooped into the brightly-illuminated hall.

Merry it was who replied: "Doris told me to tell you that she had company arrive unexpectedly. It was so late that there wasn't time to telephone and ask permission to bring her friend. She knew you would say yes, but she feared it would inconvenience you."

The gladness left Geraldine's face. "But, Merry," she protested, "we can't have Doris' birthday party without Doris here. It would be like giving the play 'Hamlet' and leaving Hamlet out." Then turning to Alfred she said, "Brother, please drive down and bring back both Doris and her guest."

Just then Danny O'Neil appeared, and, after having greeted the newcomers, she said: "Miss Geraldine, there's a beggar at the back door and she insists that she must see you at once."

A month previous Geraldine would have tossed her head and replied haughtily that a beggar woman most certainly could have nothing to say to *her* that she would care to hear. Perhaps even then she might have replied impatiently had she not chanced to see Jack Lee intently watching her.

Turning to Merry, she asked her to escort the girls upstairs to remove their wraps (Alfred was leading the boys to his den), then she hurried into the kitchen wondering why a beggar should ask to see her.

In the dimly-lighted back entry stood a frail woman, shabbily dressed, who was leaning on a cane. A black bonnet shaded her face, and Geraldine believed that she had never before seen this beggar person. The stranger began to speak in a weak, wavering voice. "Miss Geraldine," she said, "I am a poor widow with one child and seven husbands. Oh, no, I mean one husband and seven children. My husband is sick, my young ones are starving. I heard as how you were going to have a fine party tonight and I came to beg you to save a few crumbs for my poor babies."

Geraldine was puzzled. The woman before her was shabby enough to be a beggar, but her plea did not ring true.

"If you will come into the kitchen," the girl replied, "I will pack a basket for you to take to your seven husbands and one child."

There was a shout of laughter from the door leading into the dining-room, and Geraldine, turning,

beheld the boys and girls peering over each other's shoulders watching the fun.

"I just knew it was a prank," Geraldine laughingly exclaimed. Then to the beggar woman she said, "You're Doris, of course."

"No, she isn't," a merry voice called from the doorway, and there, among the others, stood the missing Doris.

The supposed beggar suddenly removed her bonnet and the laughing face of Geraldine's dearest friend from the city was revealed.

With a cry of joy, the delighted hostess embraced the beggar, rags and all.

"Adelaine Drexel," she exclaimed, "this is the most wonderful surprise. Why didn't you write me that you were coming? Or, Doris, why didn't you tell me?"

Then turning to the smiling housekeeper, the girl exclaimed: "Mrs. Gray, this is my dear little playmate. We have lived next door to each other ever since our doll days. You've heard me speak of Adelaine Drexel just steens of times."

Then slipping her arm about the laughing beggar girl, she led the way up to her room. Ten minutes later they reappeared. Adelaine had shed her shabby

costume and looked like a rose fairy in a pretty pink gown.

When the young people were seated around the blazing log in the library, the stately Colonel Wainright appeared and was gladly greeted by all. Then Mrs. Gray called: "Come, children; supper is ready."

Geraldine laughed. "I just can't impress Mrs. Gray with my age and dignity. She always will call me 'little girl.' "

"I think she is the dearest old lady," Adelaine Drexel declared. "She's just my ideal of a grandmother. I am so glad that she is here with you."

Geraldine's own ideas about how one should feel toward an "upper servant" had undergone such a complete change that she now replied with enthusiasm: "I do love Mrs. Gray. She is very superior to her position. She is the Colonel's housekeeper, you know."

In the brightly lighted dining-room the young people were standing while the little old lady designated their places. Geraldine noticed that she was giving up her own seat at one end of the table for the unexpected guest.

"Oh, Mrs. Gray," she intervened. "You have

forgotten our plan. You are to sit there. I won't need a chair just at first, for I am going to serve."

"And I am going to help," Jack Lee declared. Then, taking the self-appointed waitress by the hand, he led her kitchenward.

"That was great of you, Geraldine," he said when they were alone. "Lots of girls would have let the old lady wait on them. Now give me a towel to throw over my arm, and a white apron so that I will look like a regular garcon."

This added to the fun, and for the first time in her sixteen years Geraldine found herself actually serving others in what she would have scornfully called, two months before, a manner degrading and menial.

Now and then Bob Angel sprang up to lend a hand, and when Jack and Bob tried to be comedians there was always much laughter and playful bantering.

The whipped-cream cake was praised until the cheeks of the maker thereof glowed with pleasure. Then, when the others had been served, they moved closer and made room for Geraldine and Jack. When they were leaving the table, Doris said softly to the Irish lad:

"Danny, I want to see you alone as soon as possible."

When the young people were in the library playing old-fashioned games, with dear Mrs. Gray and the Colonel joining in now and then, Doris and Danny slipped away unobserved.

They sat on a window seat in the hall and the girl turned such glowing eyes toward the boy that a load of dread was lifted from his heart.

"Good angel," he said, "after all it isn't anything about the highway robbery that you have to tell. I can see that by your face. I was so afraid that——"

The girl placed a finger on his lips. "Danny O'Neil," she said seriously, "I want you to promise me that you will never again refer to that mistake in your life. I myself would completely forget it if you did not speak of it so often. I want you to forget it, too. We must not let the mistakes of our past hold us down. It is what we are, and what we are going to be that count, not what we have been. Now, remember, sir," Doris shook a finger at him, "your 'good angel' will be good to you no longer if you ever mention that subject again."

The lad looked at the pretty girl at his side and

said earnestly: "Doris, I can't understand why you are so kind to me, a no-account Irish boy who isn't anybody and never will be anybody."

Doris laughed. "Danny, would you mind if we changed the subject? I wish to do the talking, so you be as quiet as a little brown mouse while I tell you my glorious plan, but first of all I want to thank you for the beautiful bookrack that you carved for me. It's hanging on the wall of my room this very minute and my prettiest books are in it." Then, laying her hand on the boy's arm, she added: "Danny, please don't call yourself good-for-nothing. It is not right for us to speak that way of the gifts that God has given us. Mother thinks that the carving of the bookrack shows that you have unusual talent and that the wild rose design is very pretty."

The boy's face glowed with pleasure. "Oh, Doris," he said eagerly, "do you really think that maybe, sometime, I could make good with my designing? You don't know what it would mean to me if I could."

"It would mean a whole lot to me, too, Danny," the girl said, rising. "Now we must go back to join the others, but there, I have forgotten the very thing that I wanted to ask you, which is this: Are you

willing that I send the bookrack to a friend of Mother's who is an artist? He would be able to tell just which course of training you ought to have."

"Good angel, would you do it for me?" the boy asked eagerly. "Then I wouldn't have to be just groping in the dark. I'd know better how to plan my life."

These two joined the others, who had not missed them. Merry was talking to Geraldine and Doris joined them.

"Why didn't Myra Comely come to your dinner party?" the president of the "S. S. C." was asking their hostess. "You invited her that night at our house."

Geraldine nodded. "And, more than that, I dropped her a card telling her the date and that I would send my brother after her, but she 'phoned early this morning that her mother had caught a severe cold that might develop into pneumonia and she could not possibly leave her."

"Poor girl!" Doris said. "I'm glad tomorrow will be Saturday again. I shall drive around and see if there is anything I can do for them. Mother would want me to. She likes Myra ever so much. She wanted to meet her when she returned the laun-

dry last Thursday, and she said she thought her an unusually fine girl. Myra told Mother that she had hoped to be able to go through Teachers' College that she might care for her mother, who is not strong. But now I suppose she will have to give up, just as she is about to graduate from High."

"O, I hope not!" Merry said. Then three of the boys approached to claim them as partners for a dance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KINDNESS REWARDED

MERRY, Geraldine and Doris went alone the next day to the home of Myra Comely. Danny O'Neil drove them there, then waited in the cutter until they came out.

Myra opened the door slightly, saying that perhaps they would better not come in, but Geraldine declared that she never caught anything, and as Merry and Doris had no fears, they entered the neat little living-room and sat down, while Doris gave the message from her mother.

Tears sprang to the girl's eyes. "How very kind of your mother to offer to send us her own private nurse," she said with sincere appreciation. "Dr. Carson was with us all night, and he says that the crisis is now over and that Mother will not have pneumonia, but that she is worn out and will need absolute rest for a long time. The doctor said that

she ought to go where the winters are milder." Myra was wiping her eyes, trying, as the girls could see, to keep from breaking down. Doris went to her and put an arm across her shoulders. With tender sympathy she said: "Myra, you're just worn out with these three days and nights of watching and anxiety. I wish you would let me telephone Mother to send our dear old nurse; then I would like to take you home with me for a rest." But the girl was shaking her head. "O, no, no! I couldn't leave Mother. She still has spells of wandering in her mind. She thinks she is a girl again on her father's ranch in Arizona——"

She got no farther, for three girls exclaimed in excited chorus: "Was *your* mother Myra Cornwall? Has she a brother Caleb in Arizona?"

The girl dropped her handkerchief and stared in unbelieving amazement. "How in the world did you know my mother's maiden name?" she gasped. "Mother has told no one. Not that she was ashamed of it, but—but—you see, she married against her parents' wishes and she knew they would never want to see or hear from her again. Her brother Caleb disliked my—my father, more even than her parents did, and so she never wrote, not even after my father

died and we were so poor." Then with mouth trembling and eyes tear-brimmed, the girl asked: "Won't you tell me what you know about it?"

And so Doris told about the clipping they had found in the Dorchester paper, and how they had called on all the Myras they could find. "But *your* mother was born in New York state," Merry recalled. "*That* is why we decided that she could *not* be the one."

Myra nodded. "Yes, that is where Mother was born, but her parents went West when she was five, and she lived on a ranch in that beautiful desert country until she was sent East to school."

Suddenly she sprang up, a glad light in her face. "Mother is awake! I hear her calling me. I must go and tell her the wonderful news." Then impulsively she held out a hand to Doris as she said: "How can we thank you. Now, as soon as Mother is well, I can take her to the home she has so yearned to see, knowing that her brother Caleb wants her, *really wants* her."

* * * * * * *

When the girls were again in the sleigh, they told Danny to race for town. They were to attend the

weekly meeting at Peg's house and they had wonderful news to tell.

In a remarkably short time they reached there and found the others assembled. "Girls," Doris burst out before she had removed her outdoor wraps. "The mystery is solved! Myra Comely, I mean the mother, *is* the one we wanted. And now that she may go back to her Arizona home and won't have to take in washing any more, she will get well, I am sure, just ever so soon. Myra is going to send a telegram at once to her uncle, and I know that he will send money to them for the journey."

"Now all of the mysteries are solved except where the boys have their clubroom," Peg began, when Bertha laughingly told them that that even wasn't a mystery any longer.

"How come?" Peg asked.

"Well, last night Mother wanted a yeast cake from the store just before bedtime that she might put some dough to rise. Dad had gone to lodge and Bob had left early with the boys, so I took a lantern and went to the store. I had a key to the side door and I went in. At first I was very much startled to see a light coming through cracks in the floor of a storeroom over the back part. One has to go up

a ladder on the side wall and then crawl through a trapdoor to get to it. I was just wondering why thieves would want to go up there where Dad keeps hardware supplies and things like that, when I heard a laugh, and I *knew* it was Bob. Then I realized that I had stumbled on the secret meeting place of the 'C. D. C.' "

"Well, that's a much more sensible place than the old Welsley ruin would be," Merry commented.

Having removed their wraps, they all sat about the cosy fire and Peg passed around the garments they were making for the orphans.

"There's one thing sure, the solving of our mystery spread sunshine all right, and so we lived up to our first motto without really meaning to," Merry commented.

Peg inquired: "Did you hear anything that the boys were talking about?"

"I tried not to," Bertha said. "I went at once to the front of the store and got my yeast cake, but, just as I was stealing back out again, so that they wouldn't hear me, I heard Bob say: "Four o'clock Saturday. That's tomorrow! Surprise the girls."

The seven sleuths looked at each other in puzzled

amazement. "Hum! Another mystery, I should say," Peg commented.

Merry glanced at her wrist watch. "Well, if the boys are planning a surprise for us, since it is three-thirty now, we won't be kept long in suspense."

Nor were they, for in a half hour, punctually at four, the boys arrived and stated that they had received permission from the parents of the girls to take them somewhere on a sleigh ride.

"Oh, what fun!" Merry sprang up, as did the others. Little blue garments were folded and outdoor wraps were donned upstairs in Peg's room.

"I know! I know!" Peg sang out. "You remember that time at the Drexel Lodge when we wanted to stay and ride home by moonlight, we couldn't, and the boys said they would take us for a moonlight ride at some other time."

Merry nodded. "I believe you're right. *Where* do you suppose we are going?"

It was half an hour later, and the village had been left far behind before the answer was revealed to them. "Up the East Lake Road!" Bertha exclaimed.

It was half past five and dark when they drew up in front of the Inn. Mr. Wiggin, the genial host, popped out to welcome them. "Come right in!

Come right in!" he called good-naturedly. "Everything is piping hot and ready to serve." The girls were delighted.

"Oh, boys, you're giving us a surprise supper, aren't you?"

"That's jolly fun!"

"Aren't we glad we know them!" were a few of the many expressions of appreciation from the girls as they were helped from the long sleigh.

That "something" that was piping hot and ready to be served proved to be the wonderful combination clam chowder for which the Lakeside Inn was famous. The dining-room was warm and cheerful, with red-shaded lamps around the walls, and the jolliest hour was passed while the boys joked and told stories, which they had evidently learned for the occasion.

When the dessert, Mrs. Wiggin's equally famous plum pudding, had been removed, Bob tapped on the table for attention. "Young ladies," he said, "we boys of the 'C. D. C.' having heard how cleverly you solved a mystery——"

"What? *How* did you hear?" two of the girls exclaimed in surprise.

"Well, that *is* an important point to clear up,"

Bob acknowledged. "Jack, here, was in the telegraph station about three this afternoon, and Myra Comely was there sending a message to some uncle of hers in Arizona. She was so excited, she spilled the beans, and told Jack all about your mystery club and how you found her mother's brother." He paused to look about at the astonished group. Then, seeming to be satisfied, he continued: "We boys are working on a mystery, and since you girls are so clever (no bouquets, please; he pretended to dodge) we thought we would invite you to—er—be associate members of *our* club. We hope that you will consider it an honor."

Merry sprang up and, lifting her glass of water, she said: "Here's to the combined Conan Doyle and Seven Slueths' Clubs. Long may they wave."

"Ditto!" Bob lifted his glass, as did the others. Then they all rose, for Jack had dropped a nickle in the automatic organ and it was playing dance music which could not be resisted.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MUCH LOVED GIRL

"GERALDINE, dearie, why don't you get up? Aren't you feeling well this morning?"

It was the day after the sleigh-ride party. Mrs. Gray had purposely permitted the girl to sleep late, but now it was nearing the hour of noon.

Geraldine tossed restlessly and her face was feverish. "Oh, Mrs. Gray," she said, "I have such a headache. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. Then I tried to call, but you did not hear."

The little old lady was truly worried. She placed her cool hand on the hot forehead, and then she hurried from the room, promising to be back in a few moments. She went at once to the Colonel's study, hoping that he had returned from his morning constitutional, but he was not there. Going to the telephone, Mrs. Gray was soon talking to Doctor Carson.

"I'm so afraid our little girl has been exposed to some contagious disease," she said. "Won't you please come over at once?"

The kindly doctor was at the house fifteen minutes later and with him was the Colonel, whom he had met on the highway.

The doctor examined the girl, who was too listless to heed what was going on. "Geraldine is very ill," he said seriously.

"Come to think of it, Myra Comely told me that three of the girls, Geraldine among them, had brought her the wonderful news that she had to tell me about her mother's brother. Mrs. Comely had been ill for nearly a week with a form of influenza which is often fatal." Then, noting the startled expressions on the faces of his listeners, the doctor added: "Do not be alarmed, however, for we have taken *this* case in time. I am sure of that."

But, as days passed, the Colonel and Mrs. Gray were not so sure, for, in spite of their constant and loving care, Geraldine grew weaker. The little old lady would permit no one else to nurse the girl, but day and night she was near the bedside, ministering with an unceasing tenderness and devotion.

The Colonel procured two capable young women

to assist in the household. They were Matilda and Susan Rankin, who for years had worked for the Morrisons in Dorchester. Merry Lee and Doris Drexel, having been equally exposed, were kept home from school for a week, but they had evidently been able to resist the contagion and were not ill.

Jack Lee called often to inquire about Geraldine, and his heart was heavy when the news was so discouraging. Then, at last, came a day when, with hope almost gone, the Colonel, with an aching heart, cabled to Geraldine's father. He was in England still and he could not reach Sunnyside for two weeks, but Geraldine often called faintly for her "Dad," and the Colonel knew that he must send for him.

"I expect the crisis tonight," the doctor said late one afternoon. Jack Lee, hearing of this, sat up with Danny O'Neil in his room over the garage. Alfred had promised to place a lighted candle in a rear window as soon as the doctor believed Geraldine to be out of danger.

The long dark hours passed and it was nearing dawn. Danny had fallen asleep, but Jack, alone in the dark, sat watching for the candle which did not appear.

At sunrise, as his friend had not awakened, Jack,

unable to stand the suspense longer, went out in the garden hoping that he might see someone from whom he might make inquiries. As he passed beneath a window, it was softly opened and Alfred leaned out. His face was drawn and white.

"Jack," he called, "please telephone Merry and the other girls and tell them that Geraldine seems to be asleep. We thought for hours that she would never awaken, but now the doctor reports that her breathing is more normal. He is confident that the worst is over."

The listener's face brightened. "Good!" he ejaculated. "Is there anything you want from town? I am going to take Danny home with me to breakfast and he can bring back anything you may need."

Alfred disappeared to consult the housekeeper as to what supplies might be required, and Jack, leaping up the garage stairs two steps at a time, found Danny awake and wondering what had become of his friend.

He, too, was indeed glad to hear the good news, and a few moments later, when Alfred had dropped a list out to them, they drove away with lighter hearts than they had had in many a day.

Great was the rejoicing in the town of Sunnyside

as the news was telephoned from one home to another, and a week later, when Geraldine was strong enough to sit up for a few hours in her sunny bow window, the six girls, wrapped in furs, stood beneath it waving to her and smiling and nodding to assure her of their friendship. When they were gone, there were tears in the eyes of the invalid as she turned toward the ever watchful old lady who sat sewing nearby.

"Mrs. Gray," she said, "am I different or is everyone else different? When I first came I did not want to know these country girls, but now I love them all dearly." Then, before the little old lady could reply, Geraldine asked, "Is my Dad coming today?"

The housekeeper looked troubled. The Colonel could not account for the fact that Mr. Morrison had not been heard from since he first cabled that he would return as soon as possible.

"Surely he will be here tomorrow by the latest," was the evasive answer.

The girl's gaze then rested on the soft, silvery hair of the bent head.

"Mrs. Gray, why have you been so good to me? An own relation couldn't have been kinder. You

have tired yourself all out, I know, caring for me day and night. I don't deserve it."

There was a twinkle in the eyes that looked at the girl. "I've been playing a game, Geraldine," she said. "I've been pretending that you were my make-believe granddaughter." Then wistfully she added: "You don't know how all these last ten, long years I have yearned for someone who really belonged to me, someone to care for."

Before Geraldine could reply, the door bell pealed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HAPPY REUNION

THE tall, fine-looking man who stood on the front porch lifted his hat as Mrs. Gray opened the door.

"I'm Mr. Morrison," he said, and then he hastened to inquire: "How is my little girl today?"

The housekeeper's face brightened. "Oh, I'm so glad that you have come," she said. "Geraldine was asking for you but a moment ago. She is much better, but I am not sure that she is strong enough to see you unless I first tell her that you are here. Sudden joy may be as great a shock as sudden sorrow."

But, as they ascended the stairs and went quietly down the corridor, they heard the girl calling, "Daddy! Oh, I know it's you, Daddy. I've been expecting you all day long."

When the tender greeting was over, with shining eyes the girl looked at him as she said, "I'm going

to get well right away now, I know. I've been so lonesome for you, Dad." Turning toward the little old lady, she added lovingly: "Mrs. Gray is my make-believe grandmother, and you can't guess how good she has been to me." Then suddenly thinking of something, she smilingly declared: "Why, that makes Mrs. Gray your make-believe mother, doesn't it, Dad?"

The man, because of his great anxiety about his daughter, had scarcely noticed the old lady. He now turned and looked at her, intending to thank her for her kindness to his little girl. To his surprise tears were rolling unheeded down the wrinkled cheeks, although, in the sweet face, there was an expression of radiant joy. Then Mrs. Gray held out her arms to the amazed man and said in a voice that trembled with emotion, "Alfred, my boy, don't you know me?"

A few moments later when the Colonel entered the room he smiled around at the happy group.

"Well, Mrs. Gray," he said after he had exchanged greetings with the newcomer, "we don't have to keep our secret any longer, do we?"

"Oh, Colonel Wainright," Geraldine exclaimed,

"have you known all the time that Mrs. Gray was my real grandmother?"

"Yes, lassie, but she did not want me to tell you. She wished first of all to win your love."

A door banged below and Alfred leaped up the stairs two steps at a time, Susan having told him that his father had arrived.

He, too, was amazed to learn that Mrs. Gray was their grandmother. "I'm bully glad," the lad exclaimed, as he kissed the beaming old lady. Then he added: "Of course I knew that Dad ran away from home when he was sixteen and that he had never since seen his parents, but you thought they were dead, didn't you, Dad?" His father nodded.

"I've been alone for ten years," Mrs. Gray told them, "and during that time I've been hunting for my boy."

"All's well that ends well!" Alfred said, and his father added: "Just as soon as Geraldine is able to travel, we must return to our home in Dorchester."

"Oh, Dad!" the girl protested, "I do wish we might stay in the country forever."

* * * * * * *

The next day, at Mrs. Gray's suggestion, her son took her for a drive in the light buggy. Although

the Colonel had two automobiles, the little old lady preferred the old-fashioned way of traveling. They drove along Willowbend Road, where the last bits of snow were rapidly disappearing and where reddish green buds were to be seen on the drooping trees that gave the country road its name.

Mrs. Gray lifted a beaming face and smiled up at her long lost son from under her quaint Quaker-like bonnet. "You haven't asked me, Alfred, why my name is Gray?"

"No," he acknowledged, "I supposed that you would tell me in time if you had married again."

She shook her head. "No, I never did. Because I always dressed in grey, friends began to call me that, and when I came here once more searching for some trace of you, I thought I would use that name; and I am glad that I did, for by so doing I won the love of my granddaughter. She might otherwise have cared merely from a sense of duty." Then, as they turned in between two stone gate posts, the man said: "How strange it seems to be, coming back to our old home. I thought it had been sold for taxes long ago."

"It was nearly sold," Mrs. Gray replied, "but I heard of it in time to pay the back taxes and keep it.

At first I thought, when I couldn't find you, that I did not care to own it, for every corner and tree reminded me of you when you were a boy, but now I am so glad that I have kept our old home. It is rather dilapidated," she added brightly, "but in a week or so we can have it all in readiness before we tell the children a word about it. Then, when Geraldine is strong enough to be moved, we will bring her over here."

"How pleased she will be," Mr. Morrison declared. "I will go to Dorchester tomorrow and see about selling our other place and have the furniture sent down here."

"I thought we'd let Alfred have the room that was yours when you were a boy," Mrs. Gray continued, "and that sunny bay window room which overlooks the garden is the one I have planned for Geraldine."

"Mother," the smiling man protested, "you know how completely I have been spoiling our girl. You aren't going to do the same thing, are you?"

The little old lady shook her head. "Geraldine is a changed lassie. She won't spoil now."

"And it's all due to your loving influence, I am sure," Mr. Morrison declared.

There were twinkles in the eyes that looked up at him. "I can't take all of the credit," Mrs. Gray replied. "I think someone else had even more to do with the change in Geraldine than I have had."

She was thinking of Jack Lee, but at that time she did not care to tell her son about him.

The old house was one of those charming places, pillared in front, with wide halls and large, many windowed rooms that could easily be transformed into just the kind of a home that Geraldine liked best.

Busy days followed for Mrs. Gray and her son. Then, three weeks later, Doctor Carson announced that Geraldine was strong enough to be moved.

So well had the secret been kept that the lassie supposed that they were going to Dorchester.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOME, SWEET HOME

GERALDINE, supposing that they were about to leave for the city, could not understand why her friends had not called to say good-bye.

"Perhaps they will be waiting at the station," she said to Alfred when they were all in the big car, with Danny O'Neil at the wheel.

"Like as not," the unsuspecting lad replied.

The Colonel glanced at his watch. "Morrison," he said, "it's a whole hour before train time. Would you mind if we went farther out on the Willowbend Road? I have a little business there that I would like to attend to."

"It's all right with me," the other man replied, and Alfred, happening to look at his father, was sure that he had turned away to hide a smile.

Ten minutes later the car turned into the circling

drive and stopped in front of the pillared porch of an old colonial home.

"What a pleasant place this is," Geraldine said. "Who lives here, Colonel Wainright?"

"Some good friends of mine," that gentleman replied as he prepared to leave the car. Then, as though it were a sudden afterthought, he added: "I wish you would all come in for one moment. We'll have plenty of time to get the train."

"It seemed odd to the girl that they should call upon strangers just before leaving town, but she was too fond of the Colonel not to willingly do whatever he suggested, and so, leaning upon his proffered arm, she slowly climbed the wide steps.

To Geraldine's surprise, the door was opened by Susan, and when they entered the wide hall she saw Matilda, who was beaming upon them. What could it mean? Glancing into the attractive room on either side, the girl was amazed to see the furniture which had been in their city home. Then suddenly she understood and, turning a radiant face toward her father, she exclaimed: "Oh, Dad, we aren't going to Dorchester, are we? I'm so glad! But do tell me, how did you happen to find this wonderful place? I just adore old-fashioned colonial houses."

"It's where I was born," her father replied. "You're grandmother and I have been planning it all to surprise you and Alfred."

"Well, it sure is a surprise to me," the lad declared, "and I'm bully glad that we're going to stay in the country."

"Do the girls know about it?" Geraldine asked, but before anyone could reply there sounded in the driveway the ringing of a cowbell, the tooting of horns and the gay laughter of young people.

Doris was the first to enter the hall of the Morrison home when the door opened, but a troop of laughing boys and girls followed closely.

"Oh, Geraldine," Doris exclaimed, "isn't this a grand and glorious surprise. We didn't know a thing about it until this morning. We had supposed that you were going to Dorchester, and we planned being at the station to say good-bye when someone 'phoned Jack for us to come here instead."

"We are all so glad that you are to stay in Sunnyside," Merry declared. Tears gathered in the lovely eyes of the girl, who was still not strong, and Jack, noticing this, held out his arm.

"Princess Geraldine," he said, "permit me to lead

you to your throne, where you may receive the homage of your rejoicing subjects."

A moment later, when the happy girl was seated near the fireplace, with Jack standing at her side, Doris, looking about the group, exclaimed: "Where is Danny O'Neil? Why isn't he here with us?"

"I think he went to the garage," Alfred said. "I'll bring him in." The two lads soon entered the house together and Alfred's arm was thrown over the other boy's shoulder to assure him that he considered him a friend and an equal. Doris walked up to them and, holding a long envelope before the Irish boy, she exclaimed: "Mister Danny O'Neil, if you can guess what this envelope contains, you may have it."

"Why, Doris, how should I know?" the mystified lad replied. "I never had a letter written to me by anyone."

Well, you certainly have one now," Doris declared, "but I'm going to read it out to the entire company, so please lend me your ears." Then, opening the important looking envelope, she read:

"Dorchester Art Institute, March the first.

"Mr. Danny O'Neil: We are glad to inform you

that the carving which you submitted in our recent contest has been awarded first place, and as a result you will receive a scholarship in our institution for one year from this date, all of your expenses to be paid. We advise you to come at once as new classes will be formed on Monday, March the fifth."

The expression on the face of the Irish lad was first puzzled and then radiant. "Doris," he said, "you entered that carving in the contest and I didn't know a thing about it."

"Oh, Danny," Merry exclaimed as she held out her hand, "I congratulate you for all of us."

A little later Doris found the lad standing alone by a window gazing out at the trees that were showing a haze of silvery green.

He looked up with a welcoming smile. "Doris," he said, "I'm thinking how pleased my mother would be." Then he added: "I'm going to try hard to succeed, Good Angel. I want you to be proud of me."

When the others were gone, Jack remained to spend the evening with Alfred, so he said, but during the long twilight he and Geraldine sat before the fireplace and the girl listened to the lad's dreams of

his future on a cattle ranch, and her heart was made happy when Jack said earnestly, "You'd love it, Geraldine. From now on I am going to hope that you will be there with me."

THE END.

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